

**The Furusato as Mother:  
Gendered Perspectives on the Home in Three Meiji and Taisho Literary  
Texts  
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## 1 Introduction

The Meiji Restoration brought about a slew of changes to Japan's social and cultural landscape. One of these changes was a heightened, widespread sense of nostalgia for the *furusato* — the “native place” or “homeland” — as hordes of people eager to pursue newfound education and work opportunities flooded into Japan's major cities, leaving their families behind in the countryside. As the *furusato* is generally a place one recognizes only upon leaving it, the spatial, temporal, and emotional distance created by this population shift to urban areas resulted in the idealization and aestheticization of the *furusato* left behind.<sup>1</sup>

Within this nostalgia for the *furusato*, the image of mother frequently appears, to the extent that the images of the mother and *furusato* often overlap each other. So deep-seated and tenacious is this mother-*furusato* connection that anthropologist Jennifer Robertson (1988) has stated, “*furusato*, as a place redolent of ‘motherly love,’ cannot exist without ‘mother’” (p. 500-1). Similarly, writer and critic Matsunaga Goichi (1975) has claimed that for most Japanese people, the *furusato* is imagined as a maternal figure — a vision that fulfills a latent desire to return to the mother's womb (p. 138). The Japanese phrase “*haha naru furusato*” (literally, “the home that is mother”) also implies the depth of this connection, even suggesting the two images are one.

This aestheticization of the “home-as-mother,” however, has a distinct gender bias; that is to say, there is a distinct scarcity of female subjectivity in discourse on the *furusato*, especially that which portrays the *furusato* in the same positive, idealized light.<sup>2</sup> For example, ethnologist Yasui Manami

(2000) has commented that although “mothers have consistently been depicted as someone else’s *furusato*,” rarely do they discuss their own *furusato* in writing (p. 1). Additionally, Yagi Tōru (1996) has noted, “A house where a reticent, brusque old man lives by himself is not typically thought to be nostalgic or a *furusato*. Rather, places that are infused with the image of women, or mother, evoke images of the *furusato*,” admitting that such an image is “extremely male-centered” (p. 53). Christine Yano (2002) has observed a similar trend in her work on *enka*: “The figure of mother herself rarely appears in *enka* songs; she surfaces instead as ‘mother remembered,’ especially by sons” (p. 174). The mother is rarely ever the subject; instead, she is more frequently a figure imagined or remembered by someone else, typically her adult, male children. Furthermore, this “mother remembered” nearly always possesses the following characteristics: she is kind, selflessly and unconditionally loving, self-sacrificing, devoted to her children, and the representative of the warmth and security of the *furusato*.

Historian Narita Ryūichi (1998), who has written much on the *furusato* in modern Japan, has also recognized this gender bias.<sup>3</sup> He mentions that men write the majority of literature on the *furusato*, and that a man’s image of the *furusato* is significantly more aestheticized and sentimentalized than a woman’s. Narita cites the poet Ishikawa Takuboku as an example, stating that whereas Takuboku himself was famous for writing an abundance of poems on his hometown in Iwate prefecture, Takuboku’s wife Setsuko left no recorded poems on her *furusato*, preferring to disclose her feelings to her closest friends (p. 248-53). While Narita’s assessment is accurate, the central question remains unanswered: why are women reluctant to write about the *furusato*, and why do they not aestheticize it to the same degree as men?

In order to understand this gender difference regarding the *furusato*—in which the *furusato* is connected to some maternal, feminine, nurturing quality, and yet has little female subjectivity—it is important to consider

the social structure of the home (*ie*) itself. Although *furusato* and the home are not one and the same, it is arguable that the home is an integral part of the overall *furusato* “package,” especially in the Meiji and Taisho periods, in which the home and family structure affected the lives and experiences of many, and was one of the reasons behind the increased migration to the city.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is through analyzing the difference in how men and women relate to the home and function within the home that we may understand the difference in how the *furusato* is perceived.

Although the Meiji and Taisho periods were an era in which Western concepts and structures were being rapidly imported into Japan, the inside of the Japanese home still resembled the traditional *ie* (家 “house” or “family”) system: a feudalistic, patriarchal system in which the father assumed complete control of the family. The main role of a woman within this system was as the wife/mother — the lowest position in the household — and her primary duty was to give birth to an heir who would then inherit the house and its assets, and continue the family line. Yet, as Yamashita Etsuko (1991) has stated, in the pre-war modern period, the home was the “woman’s place, and the living incarnate of the woman become mother” (p. 14). Thus, in a strange contradiction, while the father served as the lawful and substantive head of the household, the mother became the symbolic representation of the home, and it was her memory — not the father’s — that stayed with her children, who later came to remember and yearn for her.

For women, however, the home promised little beauty or sweetness. While the wife’s low position within the household remained largely the same between the pre-modern and modern periods, the structure of the family underwent some change. In the pre-modern family, extended family members lived together or nearby, meaning several hands could assist with childrearing or household chores. Japan’s modernization included the importing of the Western-style nuclear family, meaning the responsibility

of running of the household was left entirely to the wife and mother-in-law, if she lived with the family. The contraction of the family unit ended up creating new frictions and pressures, most especially for women. Consequently, Japan's pre-war transitional period, still clinging to feudal ideals and ethics in the space of the home while simultaneously aspiring to Western ideals, left women as victims of a new modernity.

The objective of this paper is to explore the roles of men and women within the home—especially women in the role of mother—in Meiji and Taisho era Japan in an attempt to grasp the gender difference in how the *furusato* is imagined and remembered. To achieve this, the paper will examine three literary texts from the Meiji and Taisho periods: Shimizu Shikin's "The Broken Ring [こわれ指環 *Koware yubiwa*]" (1891), Mori Ōgai's "Half-Day [半日 *Hannichi*]" (1909), and Murō Saisei's "My Childhood Years [幼年時代 *Yōnen jidai*]" (1919). Literature is chosen as the medium of analysis because the *furusato*, the home, and the mother are all essentially emotional topics, ones that concern our deepest, most private memories, and literature is one of the mediums best suited for private emotional expression. Furthermore, literature allows for a multi-layered analysis, which is suitable for this paper, as the analysis is not strictly textual; by using resources from other fields, including ethnology and anthropology, the author aims at a cultural analysis that uses literature as its medium.

The selection of these stories was primarily based on the extent to which each story features various aspects of the relationship between the mother and the home, and also because of the variety in the authors' backgrounds (one daughter, one firstborn son, and one adopted son). Due to the limited selection of stories, however, an overarching analysis of modern Japanese literature is beyond the scope of this paper, and so the experiences of social groups or peoples not represented in these texts will not be treated here. This research does not attempt to represent all experiences with the *furusato* in this period; it is limited to the elements within the selected

stories, and thus tries to make a modest contribution to the field with such. In examining how male and female roles differ within the home, the paper will also explore related issues, such as marriage laws, the *ie* system, and affiliation to the home, in order to explain the scarcity of female subjectivity in representations and recollections of the *furusato*.

## 2 Literary Analysis

### 2.1 Shimizu Shikin's "The Broken Ring"

Shimizu Shikin's (1868-1933) debut novella, "The Broken Ring [こわれ指環 *Koware yubiwa*]" (1891), is modeled on Shikin's own experience with — and escape from — a bad first marriage. The story told from the perspective of a young woman who is forced into an arranged marriage by her father, and who suffers a strained and loveless married life as a result. Yet, instead of resigning herself to the marriage or committing suicide as a method of escape — as was not uncommon for the time — the narrator divorces her husband and vows to use the experience as motivation to work towards improving women's rights.

When "The Broken Ring" was published, prostitution was a profitable, government-sanctioned business, and having multiple wives or mistresses inside or outside of the home was a fairly common practice (Watanabe, 1980, p. 76). Furthermore, feudal ethics — one of which stated that a wife should be completely obedient to her husband — were still considered to be the foundation of family life. In this way, Shikin's story, which criticizes bigamy, feudal ethics, and traditional marriage laws in Japan, was unprecedented for its time. As the narrator of "The Broken Ring" states, marriage was like the "lottery," and "whether one was lucky or unlucky was not something one had no control over — one simply had to leave it up to fate" (Shimizu, 1983, p. 16). Moreover, in the Meiji period, divorce — no matter how awful the marriage — was considered to be "unimaginably shameful" (Watanabe, 1980, p. 78). For women desperate enough to use

any method to escape an unhappy marriage, death was the only option close at hand. Seen in this light, the narrator's decision to divorce was a risky, even revolutionary, one.

Despite the narrator's initial wish to become a teacher and remain unmarried, her father arranges a marriage for her upon her turning eighteen, insisting that it is a better course for her. Once the narrator enters her husband's household, however, she immediately experiences friction in adjusting to his home, wondering in despair, "Am I to spend the rest of my life in this house?" (Shimizu, 1983, p. 19). On reluctant outings with her husband, the narrator longs instead for the times when she still lived with her parents, comparing those fond memories with her present unhappiness: "Ah, if only I were here with my mother and sister — what fun that would be!" (p. 19). Time does not erase the narrator's feelings of uneasiness and alienation, and her frequent trips home to visit her mother are her only escape from the increasingly oppressive atmosphere of her husband's home.

The mother in "The Broken Ring" is portrayed as an ideal mother and wife of the Meiji period: timid, submissive, quiet, self-sacrificing, and deferential to her husband and children. The narrator describes her as someone who lives by the tenets of Kaibara Ekken's *Greater Learning for Women*, "applying them perfectly to herself and her way of life" (Shimizu, 1983, p. 16).<sup>5</sup> The narrator sees the inequality in her parents' relationship, and views it with a critical eye, observing that her mother "would only talk to [her] father if it was at a distance, bowing, with both of her hands on the floor" (p. 16). Growing up watching her mother treat her father "as if he were some kind of special guest" in their own house, the narrator comes to think of the fate of a woman "as something pitiful and empty," wishing that "somehow [she] could live [her] entire life without having to marry, and to live comfortably and carefree" (p. 16).

However, the narrator has no concrete ideas on how to escape the

typical life of a married woman, or any knowledge about alternative paths, as she explains: “around the time I married, the seeds of women’s education were finally just starting to be sowed, therefore I had not even half of the way of thinking that I possess today [...] I had never dreamed of anything like the marriages between Westerners, and knew nothing about marriage laws. I took the old Japanese customs as a matter of course” (Shimizu, 1983, p. 15). The narrator continues to describe the state of women’s education in the early Meiji period as follows:

The girl’s school where I received my education was taught in a completely ethics-based Chinese learning style, and even the books they made us read, like Liu Xiang’s *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, trained me to think solely in that way. For example, if you were engaged from the time you were a baby to marry a man whom you had never even met before, if he died, you would have to cut off your nose and ears to show that you would never cheat on him. Or, if a mother-in-law was cruel and tried to strangle her daughter-in-law, it was considered unethical for a married woman to leave of her own accord, as it was regarded the highest of virtues for a woman not to leave her husband’s house. (Shimizu, 1983, p. 15-16)

Western ideals such as romantic love and chivalry were still fairy tales in Meiji Japan; within the household, the husband had absolute power and the wife was merely a supplementary, subservient figure. Yet, while the narrator’s education was founded in a Confucian, ethics-based style of learning, the age she grew up in was characterized by the rapid importing of Western ideals and structures. This friction between old and new ways of thinking erupts within the narrator, who follows the well-travelled path of generations past, only to discover the strain it places on her, mentally and physically.

Not long into the narrator's marriage, a maid reveals to the narrator that her husband has another wife, whom he goes to visit in secret for days at a time. This revelation creates an additional strain on the marriage, which in turn takes a toll on the narrator's health. During a visit with her mother, the mother immediately notices the narrator's pale, gaunt appearance, and realizes that she and her husband have unwittingly placed their daughter in an unhappy situation. The mother's already fragile health is worsened by this knowledge, eventually leading her to "disappear along with the morning dew on the autumn of [her] nineteenth year" (Shimizu, 1983, p. 21). Once the narrator realizes that her unhappy marriage may have contributed to the deterioration of her mother's health, she becomes "indignant at the plight of women," and chooses to divorce after unsuccessful attempts to improve her own crumbling, stifling marriage (p. 21). Once her divorce is finalized, the narrator vows to devote the rest of her life to working for women's rights, so that her mother's death would not be in vain, and to neutralize the pain and suffering she experienced in her own marriage.

Underlying the narrator's discomfort in trying to adjust to her husband's home is the issue of a woman's "affiliation" (帰属 *kizoku*) to a family. Upon marriage, a woman lost her place within her parent's home and became a member of her husband's family. As sociologist Inoue Haruyo (2006) writes, "pre-war marriages, as regulated by Meiji civil law, took the form of 'the wife entering the husband's home.' At the time of marriage, the wife had to discard the environment and way of thinking of the home she had grown up in, including her preferences or the way she seasoned food, and became a member of her husband's house. Furthermore, she became a 'powerless person' with no legal rights; not only did she not have the same rights as a man, but she did not even have parental rights to the children she bore" (p. 40). For women, traditional marriage practices meant relinquishing their entire identity and upbringing.

While a wife was permitted to return to her parents' home on occasion— as the narrator of “The Broken Ring” does — these visits were neither long nor leisurely. The length was typically determined by how much the wife's presence was needed at her husband's house; for example, returning home during the harvesting season would be difficult for a farmer's wife (Hasegawa, 1988, p. 80). Other factors, such as distance and the wife's relationship with her mother-in-law, influenced the frequency and duration of these trips home (Yasui, 2000, p. 7). Consequently, a married woman's affiliation to a home was unstable, as she legally “belonged” to her husband's family, but was able — and obligated — to make infrequent trips to her parents' house, in which she was no longer legally a family member.

“The Broken Ring” presents two women whose lifestyles are determined by — and suffer as a result of — the home. The narrator's mother, who acts the part of the ideal Meiji wife, leads a “pitiful and empty life” in constant subservience to her husband, and dies partly from the guilt of having placed her daughter in an even worse situation than herself. The mother's passing alerts the narrator to the necessity for initiating change, her death symbolizing the impending destruction of feudal morality and the traditional family and marriage systems. The narrator, while able to escape her marriage, is still scarred by its mark on her life, represented by the broken ring she continues to wear. In contrast to her mother, she represents the transitional period in women's rights: she must bear the burden of former generations, while attempting to improve the situation for current and future generations of women. Within Shikin's story, we see two female characters scarred by the violent changes occurring in the family and home during the Meiji period, but also attempts towards forging new paths for women.

## 2.2 Ōgai Mori's “Half-Day”

“Half-Day [半日 *Hannichi*]” (1909) is one of Mori Ōgai's (1862-1922) more

unusual works. The piece is written in a casual, spoken vernacular — atypical for Ōgai, who preferred a rigid, formalistic style — and is also a rare autobiographical piece that exposes the relationships between the members of the Mori household: primarily, the tempestuous relationship between Ōgai, his wife, and his mother, depicted within the story as the “professor (博士 *hakase*),” “wife (奥さん *oku-san*),” and “mother (母君 *hahagimi*),” respectively.

The story takes place during the span of half a day, from daybreak until noon. The narrative takes place within the professor’s home, and revolves around a conversation between the professor and his wife about the wife’s intense dislike of her mother-in-law, who lives with the couple and their small daughter. Needless to say, stories depicting conflict between the wife and the mother-in-law are common fare in Japan. However, stories of this type usually depict the mother-in-law as a cruel bully and the wife as a hapless victim. “Half-Day” instead presents an unusual twist on this theme: the wife is illustrated as a truly monstrous being who threatens the harmony of the professor’s household with her irrational, hysterical rages towards the mother-in-law.

The wife makes no attempt to conceal her fears or her deep dislike of her mother-in-law. She complains incessantly about her mother-in-law’s voice and the fact that she has complete control over the household budget and not the wife, and refuses to be in the same room as she, referring to her as “that person” (あの人 *ano hito*). When the professor entreats his wife to call her “mother,” the wife replies, “I came to this house to be your wife, not to be that person’s child” (Mori, 1987, p. 463). As previously discussed, when a woman married into her husband’s house, her affiliation shifted to the husband’s family, and she became a member of that house. Therefore, the wife’s outright rejection of familial ties to the professor’s mother showed a flagrant disregard for feudal ethics and the traditional family system. For his part, the professor is utterly bewildered by his wife’s rejection of his

mother, and considers her seemingly irrational behavior in the following way:

In a country where such concrete ideas as filial piety exist, how could such a woman, who says awful things about her mother-in-law to her own husband, have been born? Even in Western thought, the mother is something sacred, so there is not a single woman who thinks it is acceptable to insult her mother-in-law in front of her husband. Of course, in the history of both the East and West, whether you look at novels or plays, there is no woman to be found like my wife. I suppose this, too, is one of the peculiar products of this time period, when everything is being reevaluated. (Mori, 1987, p. 481-482)

Ōgai—and presumably, the professor—“completely obeyed traditional feudal ethics” throughout his entire life, and showed his mother unending adoration and respect (Tanaka, 2005, p. 212). Moreover, as the eldest son and successor of the Mori family, the preservation of the household was his responsibility. Ōgai took the helm of the Mori family at the age of eighteen, upon his father’s death. Both his father and grandfather had been adopted into the Mori family, which likely added to Ōgai’s sense of obligation to maintain and protect the house. As women were unable to inherit, the adoption of sons was an integral part of the traditional family system, for it was only through sons that the house and family name could be preserved. For a man like Ōgai, who devotedly upheld such traditional values, the only way to understand his wife’s words and actions was to attribute them to the transitional period that they were living in, a time in which “everything [was] being reevaluated.”

Ōgai based the dysfunctional, discordant relationship between the wife and mother in “Half-Day” on the real-life conflict between his wife, Shige,

and his mother, Mineko. As Matsubara Jun'ichi (1957) indicates, Shige was the eldest daughter of Araki Hiroomi, an imperially appointed judge in the Supreme Court of Judicature, and grew up in a wealthy, cheerful, liberal, and loving household (p. 34). In comparison, the Mori household was frugal and severe. Having to adjust to this drastic change in atmosphere and economic circumstance undeniably played a role in Shige's mental deterioration. Daughter Ōgai Mari corroborates this in her memoirs by saying that the type of behavior described in "Half-Day" was seen only at the beginning of their marriage (as cited in Tanaka, 2005, p. 231). On the other hand, Ōgai's thrifty mother, Mineko, probably found Shige to be spoiled and her spending habits to be extravagant and reckless, meaning there were points of contention on both sides (p. 35). Yet, in "Half-Day," written from the professor's (Ōgai's) perspective, the blame is placed entirely on the wife's side.

Literary critic Tanaka Miyoko (2005) keenly observes that, through his depiction of their household conflict, Ōgai ends up revealing the kind of relationship he shared with his mother: that is, a relationship in which his mother had a hand in all of his daily affairs and fretted over him "as if she were his lover" (p. 233). In actuality, Ōgai's mother was well aware of the extent of power she had over her son, even claiming in a personal letter that Ōgai "would never question [her] decisions" (Matsubara, 1957, p. 35). In such a household, where the mother controls the son and assumes all of the wife's duties, the wife herself would have no place at all. Matsubara Jun'ichi (1957) claims that at the heart of the friction between wife and mother was really a struggle for Ōgai's love, but it seems too reductive to attribute the conflict to a mere grappling for the professor's attentions (p. 35). Certainly, jealousy was felt on the part of Ōgai's wife, even if her depiction in "Half-Day" was an exaggerated representation of the actual situation. However, as Tanaka (2005) reminds us, in order to evoke such an abnormal amount of jealousy from the wife, the relationship between mother and

son must have been exceedingly intimate (p. 233).

While Ōgai and his mother may have been exceptionally close, in general the traditional Japanese family prioritizes the mother-child relationship over that of the wife and husband. As Yamashita (1991) states, in this way the wife in “Half-Day” “has a more Westernized consciousness” in terms of her belief that the married couple’s relationship should be the foundation of a family, and not the relationship between mother and child (p. 63). Thus, at the core of the fight between wife and mother-in-law is not merely a battle for the husband’s affection, but rather a generational conflict between new and old beliefs about how the family should be structured. Yamashita calls “Half-Day” an “extremely modern” story that depicts “the transition period in which the destruction of the *ie* system was unavoidable” (p. 65). Unlike Ōgai himself, who regarded his wife’s actions with a mixture of puzzlement and dread, Yamashita sees the wife’s demands for an increased emphasis on the wife-husband relation as predicting “the coming of a bright, new age” for women (p. 65).

In the meantime, however, the reality for women living in this transition period was dark. The sudden change in environment — to one that was colder and sparser, and in which the mother-son relationship formed an impenetrable wall around the home — undoubtedly contributed to the onset of the wife’s hysteria. However, it can also be argued that the mother in “Half-Day” was also a victim, though not in the way that Ōgai imagined her to be. As Ōgai was the eldest son and the head of the Mori household, it was customary for his mother to live with him, as the mother in “Half-Day” does with the professor. This is because, in essence, a woman had no house to call her own; her affiliation to a home was dependent on the men in her life. A Japanese proverb encapsulates this unstable relationship between women and the home: “*onna sangai ni ie nashi* (女三界に家なし),” or “women have no home in three worlds.” The “three worlds” referred to here are the past, present, and future; in other words, women have no

place to call home throughout all the stages of their lives. As a daughter, a woman's home is with her father; as a wife, her home is with her husband; as a widow, her home is with her eldest son. Even if the mother in "Half-Day" wished to leave the married couple alone, she herself was bound to her son's home, as well.

Although "Half-Day" seems to present an almost comically exaggerated take on a wife/mother-in-law conflict, the story also reveals a household being upheaved by the violent changes of Japan's Meiji period, when traditional values and the family structure were being questioned. Through the depiction of this conflict and the wife's hysteria, the story also exposes the taxing effects the *ie* system had on women's mental states. The shift towards the nuclear family led to more interaction — and thus more conflict — between different generations, especially in the case of the wife and mother-in-law, who were not related by blood, and between whom power struggles would occasionally erupt. Similar to as in "The Broken Ring," "Half-Day" also shows a generational difference in expectations towards marriage. The mothers in both stories epitomize the Meiji ideal wife — devoted, self-sacrificing, thrifty, subservient — and both have resigned themselves to their situations. The narrator in "The Broken Ring" and the wife in "Half-Day," however, desired more from their marriages, were unhappy with the traditional family model, and made attempts to improve what impeded their personal happiness or fulfillment. As a result of their efforts, both stories show glances of the Meiji home teetering on destruction.

### **2.3 Murō Saisei's "My Childhood Years"**

"My Childhood Years [幼年時代 *Yōnen jidai*]" (1919) is renowned poet Murō Saisei's (1889-1962) first attempt at prose. The story is told from the perspective of a small boy, aged seven, who was adopted by another family at birth, but who maintains a close relationship with his biological

parents, particularly with his mother. The sudden death of the boy's biological father leads to the discovery that the mother was really his father's maid, resulting in the mother's expulsion from their home without even being able to say goodbye to her son. Out of desperation and sadness, the boy picks fights, wanders the streets, and prays daily to a Buddhist statue in the hope of meeting his mother again. The boy's fervent prayers garner the sympathy of an old monk residing in a nearby temple, to which the boy eventually goes to live. The new surroundings cannot replace the boy's longing for his mother, however, and the story ends in the dark, lonely winter of his thirteenth year.

Although there are two mothers depicted within "My Childhood Years"—the narrator's biological mother and his adopted mother—the narrator's emotions clearly lie with the former. He visits his biological mother upwards of twice a day, to her worry and to the adopted mother's chagrin. The home of his biological parents is depicted as an idyllic paradise, where the narrator is treated as a guest, presented with tea and sweets whenever he comes to visit, and where he is allowed to sleep on his mother's lap on long, quiet afternoons. While the narrator calls his biological mother "strict," he adds that she is also "easy to talk to," and that every time he looks at her, his heart wells up with the feeling, "this is my true mother—the mother who gave birth to me" (Murō, 2003, p. 8).

Such an aestheticized, sentimental depiction of the biological mother and the parents' home might lead the reader to expect the adopted mother and home to be cold and foreboding in comparison, but this is not the case. The adopted mother is actually more lenient than the biological mother, and sincerely cares about the narrator's well being. Yet, the narrator cannot become close to her, feeling as if "a wall were stuck in-between my mother's and my words, and in every one of our daily actions" (Murō, 2003, p. 14). As Imano Tetsu (2001) indicates, the rejection of the adopted mother's love on the part of the narrator is not the fault of the adopted

mother; rather, “the intense love and admiration for his biological mother, which dominated the narrator’s psyche, did not allow him to become close to his adopted mother” (p. 31). Saisei’s decision to portray the adopted mother as kind rather than cruel is an unusual one, for it gives the narrator no other reason to reject her love other than the fact that they are not related by blood. In this way, Saisei’s narrative suggests that nature or biology conquers all; even though the adopted mother loves the narrator and her home is not unwelcoming, the narrator still seeks his biological mother and believes that true love and understanding can only come from her.

Upon the death of the father in “My Childhood Years,” the narrator’s biological mother is driven out of the house because of her lowly position as a maid, and not as a lawful wife. The narrator had no knowledge of this at the time of his father’s death, however, and so he was merely confused as to “where [his] elegant, gentle mother had gone off to” (Murō, 2003, p. 35). The narrator’s thoughts continually turn to her, weeping at the thought “of how miserable [his] pitiful mother must be, with no place in the entire world to call home” (p. 49). Out of grief, the narrator completely rejects his adopted mother, declaring, “there is no reason that anyone should have two mothers” (p. 49). “My Childhood Years” seems to teach that one’s biological mother is an absolute entity, for which nothing can be substituted. When the narrator decides, “there is no reason that anyone should have two mothers,” he implies not only that the biological mother is irreplaceable, but also that she ought not to be replaced.

Ishiko Junzō (2006), in his research on the popularity of the mother motif in modern Japanese culture, has stated that in Japan, it is important for the mother figure to be the biological mother. In the case of stepmothers, adopted mothers, and mothers-in-law, the physical bond that unites children with their biological mothers is absent: that is, the bond created from the child having once been part of the mother’s flesh. Without this

physical bond, according to Ishiko, one cannot experience a “transcendental connection to something eternal in which complete identification is possible, like with the earth or the ocean” (p. 132). In other words, one cannot “connect to nature” (p. 132). It was this connection to “nature” that Saisei seemed to prize so highly, and that flows throughout the narrator’s longing for his mother in “My Childhood Years.”

The fate of the biological mother in “My Childhood Years” is pitifully tragic, more so than any of the other mothers examined in these three stories. As a maid, her social bearing was too low to warrant a marriage to her employer, and her status as an effectually “powerless person” meant that she had no rights to keep her own son. Moreover, she had to keep her only son away from her, for fear of what his adopted mother and society might think, and was ultimately driven out of her only home with only the clothes on her back. Saigō Takehiko (1971) comments on her tragic depiction in the story, saying, “in the world of Meiji, this was a woman’s greatest unhappiness” (p. 100). In a way, the image of the adopted mother is also a tragic one. She sees that her beloved son wants to be with his biological parents, but because of the eyes of society and how the *ie* system works, she must scold him and try to keep him in their home: “by coming here, you became a part of this house. If you keep going back to your parent’s home, people will think something is strange” (Murō, 2003, p. 13). As discussed in the previous section, when a son was adopted into a family, he became an official member of that house and lost any legal ties to his biological parents, similar to how married women became affiliated to the husband’s family—all for the sake of preserving the “home.” Unlike the previous two stories, the Meiji home in “My Childhood Years” does not show visible signs of destruction. Similarly, whereas signs of a new female image and new family structure emerge in stories like “The Broken Ring” and “Half-Day,” “My Childhood Years” paints its female characters in a ceaselessly pitiful and heartbreaking light.

Just as the narrator of “My Childhood Years,” Saisei himself was the son of a maid, who also had to relinquish her son at birth. In his novel, *Rōshishi* (弄獅子), Saisei admits the fact that he “did not really know her personality, appearance, characteristics, or even what happened to her when she died, intensified [his] love for [his] mother” (1965, p. 351). Furthermore, in *Murō’s Author’s Notes* (作家の手記 *Sakka no shuki*), he mentions that he felt no closeness or love for his father, but considered him as an “unnecessary” presence (1946, p. 10). He explains that he had no desire to learn or think deeply about his father; instead, he felt “disgusted” at his old age, and even considered him partially responsible for contributing to his mother’s unhappiness (p. 10). From Saisei’s point of view, the father was an unnecessary — even unwelcome — interference to the mother-child relationship. Yamashita Etsuko (2005) indicates that the feelings Saisei bore towards his father were neither atypical nor even unusual: “in a maternal, oppressive system that places the mother-son relationship at its core, the father’s existence is a mere formality, a mere decoration for the tokonoma” (p. 60). As in “Half-Day,” here we also see a mother-son relationship with an alarming degree of intimacy, a hollow (or absent) father figure, and a desire on the part of the son to depict the mother as a tragic victim.

Other researchers have noted the tendency to depict the mother as a beautiful, tragic figure in Japanese culture and literature. Saigō Takehiko (1971) reasons this unilaterally tragic depiction of mothers within modern Japanese literature as follows: “Perhaps it is because although Japan began its path towards modernity as a result of the Meiji Restoration, having left the feudal family system in place, the mothers of Japan had no other choice but to live in that way as they were at the bottom of that heavy, oppressive society and home” (p. 143). At the root of this depiction of the mother as a fundamentally tragic entity is a distinctly male aesthetic that longs for a sad, beautiful mother figure that stimulates Oedipal fantasies, as they imagine themselves to be the only ones who can “save” the tragic

mother. This co-dependence between mother and child was no doubt caused in part by the traditional family structure, as Yamamura Toshiaki (1977) explains:

Traditionally, the wife was viewed as a tool to give birth to children, and it was through children that the wife was able to secure her position. The mother's place in society was generally low, and she had no other options but to depend on her children to guarantee her life in old age. The wife was forced into submission by the husband/mother-in-law, and her children were her only outlets for her feelings. Free expression of love between a husband and wife was not permitted, and so if the wife were frustrated by the marriage, she would try to ease that dissatisfaction through her children. In this way, for the mother, the child became the only reason for her to live, and attachment to the child emerged. The child would then feel indignant towards the father, who tried to exert control through his power, and sympathized with the self-sacrificing, devoted mother's tragic position, and afterwards, would come to yearn for her. (p. 142)

Thus, the extreme attachment between mother and child was largely due to the wife's low position within the household and it being one of the few relationships in which an uninhibited exchange of love was permitted. Ishiko Junzō (2006) echoes this by saying, "the more the mother suffers and is unhappy, the more she is aestheticized and sanctified by the child. The mother herself also suffers in order to be more easily aestheticized and sanctified by her offspring, and clings to her children" (p. 25). Still, there remains a noticeable difference in how sons and daughters feel the tragic mother. All three children in the stories presented here are portrayed as having a close relationship with their mothers (the narrator in "The Broken

Ring," the professor in "Half-Day," and the narrator in "My Childhood Years"), but only the female narrator in "The Broken Ring" views her mother's tragic situation as something weak, pitiful, and empty, and fervently hopes for a different life for herself. In contrast, the two sons reveal a more aestheticized, sentimentalized vision of the mother. For daughters, who are able to project themselves onto their mothers, the difficult life of a married woman was a fate they hoped to avoid, but because they knew they themselves would be subject to it, it is unsurprising that they would not idealize a mother's tragedy: it could very well be their future, too. As sons lacked the same kind of identification with the mother, it was easier for them to romanticize the beautiful, tragic, loving mother figure.

Though typically viewed as a nostalgic, though highly idealized, piece on a boy's childhood, "My Childhood Years" also presents a brutal depiction of the *ie* system. Each character in the piece is somehow constrained or tormented by the home: the narrator cannot stay with his biological parents due to his adoption, the narrator's biological mother cannot marry her employer, keep her child, or stay in her lover's home, and the adopted mother must keep the narrator, whom she genuinely cares for, away from his biological parents' house against his will. "My Childhood Years" presents the reader with characters who are oppressed by the home — who must limit themselves and their desires for the sake of the home and how society expects it to function.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

As seen through these three literary texts, the frequent overlapping of the images of mother and *furusato* and the gender bias in how the *furusato* is imagined are rooted in the gender difference regarding roles within the home. Unlike men, who generally had a more clearly defined relationship with the home — they were to be successors or non-successors, and that determined their ability to stay within the natal home — women

maintained a more complicated relationship with the home and family. While a woman was bound to the home, that home was never fixed, nor was it ever truly her own. Upon marriage to another family, a woman had to relinquish her former identity and preferences in order to assimilate into the husband's family. As such, a married woman could not as easily idealize or sentimentalize the home — and by extension, the *furusato* — as a man could; for women, the home merely signified work. In the family structure of the Meiji and Taisho periods, the house was not only the wife/mother's world, but also her job, as it was her duty to maintain the household. If maintaining the home is one's job — one's everyday reality — one is unlikely to yearn after it or idealize it.

Furthermore, it was difficult for women to aestheticize a place that routinely oppressed them and chained them to a system from which they received few benefits. In short, the home was not a beautiful, sentimental place for women. As Inoue Haruyo (2006) states, “the wife birthed the successor for the continuance of the family, obeyed her mother-in-law, protected the grave and Buddhist altar of her husband's home, and entered that grave herself” (p. 40). It was a place where one had to abandon one's identity and adjust to a completely new way of life while occupying the lowest position within the family — moreover, after one had already reached adulthood and established one's own lifestyle and preferences. The word *furusato* implies a place is filled with fond memories and sentimental feelings, that it is an emotional escape from the harrowing outside world. Because of their relationship to and role within the home, however, many women in the Meiji and Taisho periods could not aestheticize the *furusato* in the same way that men could. Thus, the images of the mother and the *furusato* may intersect, but in order to reach that symbolic unification, the women in this period were made to pay a heavy price.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> An in-depth analysis of the term *urusato* and issues pertaining to it, such as urban/rural dynamics or nationalism, exceeds the scope of this paper. For a more detailed investigation of *urusato* in Japanese culture, see the author's other works: "Home of the Heart: the Modern Origins of *urusato*" (ICU Comparative Culture, no. 45, 2013) and "Kinsei ni okeru '*urusato*'-kō" (Asian Cultural Studies, no. 41, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> Writer Hayashi Fumiko's novel *Hōrōki* (1930) is often mentioned in research on the *urusato* because of the female narrator's provocative statement, "I do not have a *urusato* (*watashi wa urusato o motanai*)." Though the narrator's upbringing is a unique one and perhaps not comparable to the average person's, it supports the claim that women do not view the *urusato* in the same overwhelmingly positive and idealized way as men do.
- <sup>3</sup> Narita's research on *urusato* can be found in the following books: "*Kokyō*" *to iu monogatari: toshi kūkan no rekishigaku* (1998), *Kokyō no sōshitsu to saisei* (2000), *Rekishigaku no narrative: minshūshi kenkyū to sono shūhen* (2012).
- <sup>4</sup> There are many differences between the two words, not all of which can be treated here, but essentially, *urusato* is the more expansive of the two, occasionally comprising the village, city, or landscape surrounding the natal place. Moreover, it is used in different contexts (as mentioned, *urusato* is the "home left behind," and not typically used to describe the place in which a person currently lives), and has very different cultural and emotional implications.
- <sup>5</sup> In Japanese, *Onna Daigaku* (女大学) — a text used for teaching women proper Confucian ethics, written by Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekken.

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**ジェンダーの視点からみる「母」と「ふるさと」**  
**―明治大正期の三つの文学作品における家の構造をめぐって**  
**リンジー・モリソン**

近代日本文化や文学において、「母」と「ふるさと」は同一のものと見なされることが多いものの、母の視点から叙述された「ふるさと文学」は極めて少ない。ほとんどの場合において、母は主体ではなく、他人（たいていそれは大人になった息子であるが）による想像、または記憶に宿る客体なのである。近代日本は急速な西洋化を迎えたにもかかわらず、家の中はいまだに近代以前の家制度そのものであった。その家制度というのは、封建的な家父長制であり、ここでは父は絶対的権力を握っていた。家制度では、母は家制度のなかでは位が最も低く、後継者を産む道具としてしか見られていなかった。しかし、大人になった子どもがふるさとを振り返ったとき、その記憶の中では、絶対的権力をもつ父の姿はなく、献身的で悲劇的な母親像だけしか残っていなかったのである。その過程により、母はふるさとの代表的なシンボルの一つとなったのである。なぜ母はふるさとを表象するようになったのか、そしてなぜ男性はふるさとを美化し、理想化してきたものの、女性はそうしなかったのだろうか。

この論文では、三人の近代作家による三冊の短編小説の分析を通して、以上の問いを検討する。短編小説は、清水紫琴の「こわれ指環」（明治24年）、森鷗外の「半日」（明治42年）、室生犀星の「幼年時代」（大正8年）である。母とふるさとの関係とふるさと意識におけるジェンダー格差を考察するために、結婚制度や、家制度における母の位置や、家への帰属といった関連問題にも焦点を合わせる。

**Keywords:**

母、ふるさと、家、近代日本、ジェンダー

