Deconstructing the Patriarchal Tradition in Japan: Enchi Fumiko’s Onnazaka

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For it has well been said that the most wonderful aesthetic products of Japan are not... its porcelains, nor its swords, nor any of its marvels in metal or lacquer, but its women.—Lafcadio Hearn

Silence as a will not to say, ... a language of its own, has barely been explored.—Trinh T. Minh-ha

1. Two opposing views of Onnazaka

Onnazaka (The Waiting Years, 1957) (1) is a story of the unhappy life of a woman, who, under the strict Confucian ie (family) system (2) of the Meiji era (1868–1912), is forced to live with her own husband’s concubines under one roof. Due mainly to the vivid characterization of the heroine Shirakawa Tomo, the novel is generally agreed to be the finest work by the author Enchi Fumiko (1905–1986) and to stand among the most outstanding novels produced by Japanese women after World War II. However, owing to the highly suggestive and criptical nature of the text, the novel has received contradictory interpretations. Especially controversial has been the issue whether it should be read as a feminist novel: some critics regard it as a fine example of the feminist
The noted writer-critic Takami Jun is representative of the former view. He contends that Tomo is “a prototype of a Meiji woman”, whose life of “perseverance and suffering” brings into relief “the universal misery felt by women” in Japan through ages, and hence shows Enchi’s own “resentment” toward the cruel destiny of Japanese women as well. If we agree with this interpretation, we surely have to say that *Onnazaka* is a fine example of a feminist text.

Exactly the opposite view has been voiced by the influential critic Etō Jun. In his well-known introduction to *Onnazaka* he argues that the real cause of “Tomo’s tragedy” boils down to the fact that she devotes herself too much to the cause of the *i.e* system, neglecting her own “eros”, and hence placing “fiction” above “substance”. To support this, Etō calls attention to the fact that Tomo’s chauvinistic husband Yukitomo is presented as a man of considerable charm. Etō senses in this a clear sign of Enchi’s own “Electra Complex”, which he confesses, produces in him “an indescribable pleasure”. If we follow this interpretation, *Onnazaka* is a manifestly anti-feminist work celebrating an old-fashioned despotic manhood represented by Yukitomo.

Between these two views, I would definitely take the former one, the obvious setback in Etō’s interpretation being the fact that he speaks of Enchi’s depiction of the heroine’s self-sacrificing devotion to her family as if it were a matter of her own free choice. I will later discuss in detail how careful Enchi is to show the inevitability of Tomo’s choice, how Tomo is forced into it.

However, I should also add that Takami’s explication, too, falls short of being wholly convincing. One reason for this is that Takami does not pay any attention to one undeniable facet of the novel: that it includes marked elements that are quite attractive to readers like Etō, who unabashedly calls himself “a feudalistic man.” In his introduction, Etō celebrates Enchi’s superb use of an antiquated vocabulary throughout
Onnazaka, which vividly revives the atmosphere of Meiji Japan. As examples, Etō points to phrases such as “the well-known courtesan Imamurasaki...parading with her retinue” and “the large battledore...with its picture of the kabuki actor Kichiemon in a well-known role”. Etō concludes that the chief strength of the novel lies in the power of those expressions that reflect the author’s “passion toward the manners and customs of the bygone past.” The writer Mishima Yukio, another admirer of Enchi’s writing, made a similar point in his Sakkaron (Essays on Writers, 1970) when he expressed his deep satisfaction with Enchi’s expertise in depicting in Onnazaka “the minute details of old manners and clothing richly evocative of life in Meiji Japan”. He went on to deplore that “present-day Japan has lost her culture completely, compared with those days in which each small item comprising the everyday life of our common people had a proper Japanese name.” It is clear, then, that many readers of Enchi detect in her writing a strong preoccupation with—or even attachment to—the past, a past that was quite oppressive to many women. Small wonder, then, that an orthodox feminist writer like Miyamoto Yuriko should be dissatisfied with Enchi’s kind of writing. Miyamoto complained in her Fujin to Bungaku (Women and Literature, 1948) that some of the younger women writers of the early Shōwa period, including Enchi, showed obvious conformity to old manners and morals, “mimicking an out-modeled ‘femininity’”, a sure sign that they were “still following male standards.”

All the above views emphasize partial aspects of Enchi, and are thus only partly successful in grasping the real significance of her works. In my view, what Enchi was driving at in Onnazaka was a far larger task than any of those critics could conceive. It was to expose as well as to subvert the whole tradition of the male-centered ideology and the powerful patriarchal system of Japan, which exerted a formidable influence in enslaving and exploiting women—and continue to do so even today. Enchi’s decision to depict Tomo as a typical woman of the Meiji
era was partly due to the fact that it was during that period that this patriarchal tradition showed the most marked development throughout Japanese history. By scrupulously attending to the minute details of Tomo’s everyday reality, Enchi tried to reconstruct this tradition in her text as concretely as possible, only to disrupt it—or “deconstruct” it, to use the more recent terminology.

In the following sections, I will closely analyze the text of Onnazaka, in order to clarify how Enchi tries to delineate the male-centered tradition and the power system of Japan, and to show how she is simultaneously attempting to “deconstruct” it.

I will also deal with another feature of this novel—the author’s reaffirmation of a woman-centered tradition hitherto largely hidden behind the dominant male tradition. This will further help explore the rich implications this novel has as a feminist text.

2. The double structure of Onnazaka

Onnazaka is composed of three main chapters, each divided into several sections. The first section opens with Tomo's visit to her old female acquaintance Kusumi Kin living in Asakusa, the downtown area of Tokyo, where the old culture from the Edo era (1603–1867) still thrived. The ostensible purpose of Tomo’s visit to the nation’s capital all the way from Fukushima Prefecture where her husband Shirakawa Yukitomo serves as an important member of the municipal government is sightseeing with her nine-year old daughter Etsuko. Her real purpose, however, is to fulfill a mission entrusted to her by her husband to find a suitable young girl to be his live-in concubine. With the help of “a male geisha” named Sakuragawa Zenko, to whom Kin introduces Tomo, she surveys a number of young girls, many of them apprentices to be professional geishas. She finally chooses one girl, Suga, who is still 15 years of age.
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The situation of a wife in search of a proper mistress for her own husband is a peculiar one, to be sure, quite difficult for many of Enchi's contemporary readers to imagine. As has been pointed out by Etō and Mishima, however, Enchi skillfully builds up the vivid atmosphere of the area during that particular time, using many fresh visual images such as "shiroi tessen no tsurubana (a white clematice placed in the alcove)" and "nagame no tsugirao no enkan (a longish bamboo-stemmed pipe)", making us feel as if we were right in the section of the city where old moral and aesthetic standards from the Edo era still dominated. In addition, Enchi populates the scenes with a number of characters who seem to epitomize this area: Kin, a typical downtown woman, Zenkō, a former samurai of a minor status, and Suga's teacher of Japanese dance sensuous with her blackdyed teeth. All of those characters seem very well informed in the rules and manners governing hierarchical human relationships in this tradition-steeped area, and hence in perfect harmony with the overall atmosphere.

The most prominent of all those characters is, of course, the heroine Tomo, who also seems to fit perfectly with her environment:

Sitting there in her striped kimono, with the dignified loose jacket of black silk crepe decorated with the family crests, her sloping shoulders on which the clothes sat so well held slightly back, Tomo had the typical air of an important official's wife, an air acquired during the four or five years that Kin had not seen her.(7)

Resembling one of the female figures drawn by Kaburagi Kiyokata, a well-known Japanese-style painter specialized in kimono-clad women around Meiji and Taishō eras, Tomo nevertheless displays one distinctive feature: her facial expression, or rather her lack of any facial expression. Although she occasionally wears "a subtle smile similar to that of a female mask of noh plays", her face mostly has a deadpan ex-
pression that makes her appear somewhat constantly frustrated, "as though her eyelids were used to screen off a whole variety of emotions." To keep a deadpan expression can signify on the one hand an effort to become inseparable from one's own environment like the afore-mentioned characters, each like an inanimate object devoid of any touch of humanity. On the other hand, the same deadpan face can signify a wilful effort on the part of its wearer to protect her own inner world from all kinds of possible invasions, thus keeping her thoughts and feelings intact from any outside interventions.

This is precisely the implication of Tomo's masklike face, for Enchi shows throughout the novel that deep inside Tomo is a woman of passionate, turbulent disposition. The following is an exemplary passage that describes how Tomo feels while watching Suga, her future rival for her husband's affection, dancing on the satage:

As she gazed at the innocent body of this girl who, for all the provocative movements—the inclinations of the head and the elusive movements of the body—with which she suggested the amorous movements of men and women on the stage, was in fact still half a child, Tomo found herself wondering in what way this immature girl would be broken in, how she would be transformed, once they took her to their home and delivered her into the practiced hands of Shirakawa: unconsciously she closed her eyes and held her breath, only to see a vision of her husband and Suga with limbs intertwined that brought the blood rushing to her head and made her open her eyes wide again as though to dispel a nightmare. Pity welled up at the sorry fate of the girl fluttering before her like a great butterfly, and with it a jealousy that flowed about her body in a rapid, scorching stream.\(^{(8)}\)

In this way, Enchi depicts Tomo's inner and outer movements alter-
nately and creates what might be regarded as the double structure in the text. Hence, while reading this novel, we are allowed to witness two simultaneous dramas that present two opposing images of Tomo. The outer Tomo can be regarded as the embodiment of an ideal wife of the Meiji era, simultaneously taken as the sum of all the stereotypes given to Japanese women throughout history. On the other hand, the inner drama of Tomo allows us to see a living human existence quite separate from the outer one, a woman living with her own turbulent thoughts and emotions that continuously raise voiceless opposition against the source of all those fixed stereotypes.

At this juncture, though, Enchi shows that Tomo is no different from most Japanese women of the time, holding fast to the Confucian belief that “a wife should serve her husband as she serves heaven”. Furthermore, it is suggested that Tomo is still in love with her husband Yukitomo, “a man of ability and manly bearing”, having married him while still an innocent girl. Thus although Tomo’s acceptance of her husband’s request to find a concubine for him derives from her realization that “a self-indulgent man like Yukitomo would sooner or later take his favorite woman as a mistress into their home”, it is also due to her view of this request as evidence of an “odd trust” shown to her by her husband. Hence Tomo does not feel resentful against “her own ironical destiny to have to take care of a woman who is to be her husband’s mistress” when asked by Suga’s mother to protect her daughter’s well-being, but only sadly laughs it away.

In Enchi’s afterword to the first edition of Onnazaka, she stated that her chief intention of the novel is to describe “the struggle between a husband who continues to be chauvinistic with a trace of feudalism and a wife who has the potential for intellectual development”.(9) We have to wait for a while, though, before we begin to witness Tomo’s “potential for intellectual development” materializing—that is to say, before we see Tomo questioning her husband’s very lifestyle and the value system
upon which it rests. What we should examine next is the way Tomo’s lifelong opponent Yukitomo is portrayed, for it is through the depiction of Yukitomo and his world that Enchi reveals her concept of the male-centered ideology and the patriarchal power system that have long dominated Japan.

3. Yukitomo and his world

Yukitomo lives simultaneously in two distinct territories. The ways he is portrayed in these two territories are so different that one gets the impression that he has two separate faces. One is the face of the public political domain, where Yukitomo functions as a high governmental official. The other is the face of the private domestic domain where he lives as husband and father. Since most of the descriptions of Yukitomo focus on his relationship with his wife Tomo, it is naturally the latter face, namely as husband and father, that is emphasized. Threaded through the main story, though, are frequent accounts of the public side of Yukitomo, so that readers do get a clear picture of Yukitomo’s public persona. It is of a very aggressive man who would do anything for his professional success. Eventually he is promoted to the important position of Police Superintendent of Tokyo. This is achieved mainly through his willing contribution to the government’s policy of wiping out the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement while in Fukushima, where he prospers as the right-hand man of Michiaki Kawashima, a man referred to in the novel as “the demon governor” of Fukushima.

As any book on Japanese history will inform us, it was around this particular period of the Meiji era that Japan started to promote its militaristic colonialist policy toward foreign countries, strengthening its autocracy through the collaboration of the government and big businesses, a collaboration which successfully suppressed emerging progressive forces within the country. The rise of Yukitomo as indi-
individual is thus concurrent with the rise of the entire state power of Japan around that time, made possible largely through the powerful oppressing the less powerful both in and out of the country. Thus we can recognize a symbolic significance attached to Yukitomo: as well as being a selfish feudalistic husband, he is the incarnation of the vast oppression of the state during that period.

The other face Yukitomo displays in his private domain of the home and family, retains hardly a trace of the callousness that characterizes his outside face. Except for his eyes showing an occasional “fierce light” suggestive of “a trace of monomania”, most of the descriptions of his personal appearance present him as an almost feminine man of elegance. He has a “long slender neck”, “an acquiline nose”, and a “neat gentlemanly features”. In contrast, the words used to describe Tomo’s appearance are almost always associated with heavy-sounding adjectives: she has her “fleshy nose”, “full drooping eyelids”, “heaviness in her shoulders”, and so on. And in fact, Yukitomo in his home is in many ways a man of manifestly “feminine tastes”; he is well versed in the various light entertainments of his country, eager to appreciate the beauty of each season, always fastidious about the way he looks, a man who could almost belong to “the women’s sphere” in the standard Western culture—a man of “iki” (style), or a Japanese-style aesthetician.

A handsome flirt, Yukitomo is obviously modeled on the much revered tradition of amorous Japanese heroes seen in various genres of Japanese literature, from Yonosuke in Ihara Saikaku’s popular kabuki plays to the more modern playboys in Yoshiyuki Junnosuke’s novels. The prototype of them all can be traced to Murasaki Shikibu’s Genji (Shining Prince) in Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji, 1008). Just like Genji, Yukitomo, too, has a vast house built, where he keeps his mistresses together, holding extravagant feasts to appreciate the scenic beauty of each season surrounded by his women. By making Yukitomo a modern vulgarized version of Genji, Ench obviously makes fun of those
modern-day Japanese men who consider themselves men of “iki”, or connoisseurs. Enchi’s criticism is also probably directed at the figure of Genji himself, for both Genji and Yukitomo are similar in their attempt to monopolize public power and private pleasure, taking advantage of every woman available to them. Komashaku Kimi argues in her recent feminist reading of Genji Monogatari that Murasaki Shikibu wrote the tale to show that even desirable men like Genji could cause his women misery and unhappiness, and to crush her fellow women’s common illusions about men. If that is the case, Enchi herself might have been trying to show a similar interpretation of Genji, different from the majority of the readings done by Japanese critics prior to her time.

At any rate, women in the eyes of Japanese men are more often than not mere tools to satisfy their immediate needs and desires, and are rarely taken as separate individuals with independent thoughts and emotions. For this very reason there has existed the frequent practice of dividing women into two distinctive categories both in the literature of Japan and everyday talk—namely, “bosei-gata no onna” (the mother-type woman) and “shōfu-gata no onna” (the prostitute-type woman). Likewise in Onnazaka, the legal wife Tomo, cast in the role of ministering to the daily demands of her home and family, is obviously a mother-type to Yukitomo, while the concubine Suga, who, as Yukitomo’s infatuation with her increases, is said to be “more full grown and voluptuous”, is obviously a “prostitute-type”. Enchi, however, blurs the borderline between these two, suggesting the arbitrariness of such a division. As the object of Yukitomo’s interest changes from Suga to the second concubine Yumi and then to Miya, the wife of Yukitomo’s own son Michimasa, Suga is assigned the role of taking care of Yukitomo’s personal errands in the same way that Tomo used to be: Suga begins to harbor jealous feelings, and fear that if she expresses those “feelings seething within her”, they will “run wild in curses startling even to her”.

When a man has relationships with different women, as does
Yukitomo, the issue of jealousy naturally arises. Especially in Japan, where a long tradition of polygamous practice existed, the theme of women’s jealousy continuously palyed an important role in the various traditional genres of literature, such as noh and kabuki plays. Whilst most of them were written from a male perspective, one of the few exceptions is *Kagerō Nikki* (The Gossamar Diary, 974) by “Fujiwara Michitsuna’s Mother”, known as the first Japanese literary work dealing with the theme of jealousy from a woman’s perspective. Both Tomo and the narrator of the diary compare themselves to a snake when they suffer from their own jealous feelings. The association of female jealousy with a snake occurs in many of the misogynistic writings of Buddhism, hence long functioning as a convenient metaphor in Japan. Both Tomo and “Michitsuna’s Mother” have obviously internalized such a simile, which in turn has caused them strong fear and uneasiness. Another metaphor often used to describe women’s jealousy in Japan is that of a female devil seen most frequently in noh dramas.

Of all the stories about women’s jealousy in Japan, by far the best known is *Yotsuya Kaidan* (The Ghost Story of Yotsuya, 1825), a popular kabuki play by Tsuruya Namboku written during the Edo era. In *Onnazaka*, there is a scene where Tomo goes to see this play with Yukitomo and Suga. Tomo associates Yukitomo with Iemon, “the cool attractive” husband of the wretched heroine Oiwa, and herself with Oiwa “whose resentment at her husband’s cruel betrayal finally transforms herself into a monstrous spirit of revenge”. “As though spell-bound”, Tomo watches “those grotesque scenes in which the ghost of Oiwa took its powerful and protracted revenge.”

One may say that the feelings of jealousy unfaithful men produce in their lovers and wives are understandable feelings of anger or protest caused by cruel betrayals of trust. However, those male-centered stories have blamed the victims rather than the victimizers by changing jealous women into atrocious monsters or devils, thus stifling their
anger and resentment into silence. “I should not become Oiwa... For if I am to go mad, what should happen to my children?” Such is the voiceless cry Tomo raises when she decides to endure Yukitomo’s behavior. Enchi embodies in the figure of Tomo those countless Japanese women subject to the subtle manipulation of old myths, while depicting Yukitomo as a representative of those Japanese men protected by the same stories.

4. Invisible pressure against women—male-centered ideology and power system

Through looking at Yukitomo and his world, we can have a glimpse of what binds Tomo and all other women surrounding her. Needless to say, the blatantly misogynistic civil code existed during that period, reducing Japanese women to mere possessions of their fathers and husbands. Rather than overt form of oppression, however, what Onnazaka is chiefly concerned with is the invisible force that exerts its vast pressure on women. As we have just noted, the most obvious source of such pressure is the tradition of myths or narratives that tend to celebrate lustful, self-centered men as heroes, while placing women into convenient types, blaming those who deviate from those types as abnormal. Using her abundant knowledge of classical Japanese literature as well as her acute sensitivity to the past manners and customs of Japan, Enchi recalls throughout Onnazaka the countless male-oriented Japanese stories repeatedly told from generation to generation, exerting profound influence on the very moral and aesthetic standards of many Japanese people both past and present. In doing so, she persuasively shows that the persistence of male-centered ideology based on such stories is precisely what has been binding Japanese women for so long.

Another invisible pressure upon women shown in Onnazaka is what might be called the patriarchal power system which nourishes itself on
such an ideology. On the surface, the ideology that I have touched upon has effect only in the private domain of the home and family, since that was the only space where women and men could directly interact with each other, the outside domain being the higher territory into which barely any women were admitted. However, in Onnazaka, these two domains are depicted as hardly separable. Put together, they form one unit, into whose machinery each woman is incorporated, to support it at the lowest strata. Hence women are placed in a perennial dilemma, one that forces them to contribute to something that oppresses and binds them.

It is in the light of this recognition that the much discussed issue of Tomo’s relationship with her home and family should be considered. Tomo, by devoting herself to the prosperity of her home and family as its competent manager, is helping her husband’s rise in the world, which in turn contributes to the growing prosperity of the entire power system of Japan, resulting ultimately in its increase of pressure upon her. Tomo cannot get out of this well-ordered system of oppression, however, since, conditioned to live only in the home and the family from her early childhood, leaving it can only result in her own destruction. Furthermore, leaving it would most probably cause unhappiness to those still needing her care—her children and her grand-children.

It could be argued that Yukitomo is also a cog in this vast power system. However, while Yukitomo can receive many of the privileges given by that system, Tomo can only be exploited by it and eventually drained of all her original energy. Hence Tomo’s battle against Yukitomo seems an almost impossible one from the start: it would mean a battle against the whole patriarchal power system of her time. The story indeed ends with Tomo’s apparent defeat, her life concluded as that of an unfulfilled victim. But this is only the surface story: Tomo hides behind her mask of a stereotypical wife a complex human self, which gradually gains a critical ability, questioning the very system and ideology upon which
men like Yukitomo thrive. Hence if Tomo is to have a ray of hope in her battle, it can only be in a possibility of winning her inner spiritual victory.

In the afterword already cited, Enchi states that in Onnazaka she intends to show Tomo's "gradual growth and empowerment in spite of the cruel destiny she is placed under." Even though Tomo is physically subject to constant subjugation, she nevertheless continues to nourish her turbulent self, developing her capacity for objective appraisal of herself and her world. Hence, if we focus our attention on the process of Tomo's inner development, the novel becomes a sort of a *bildungssroman*: it becomes the story of Tomo's awakening. In the following section I will try to trace this evolution in Tomo, which will lead us to an appreciation of her ultimate inner victory over Yukitomo.

5. The story of Tomo's awakening

Tomo's initial awakening comes from her dissatisfaction with the way her husband treats her as his wife. For many years Tomo devoted "all the love and wisdom of which she was capable to the daily lives of her husband and the rest of the Shirakawa family". It was Tomo's wish to "have her husband understand through and through the innermost desires and emotions of her heart." However, one night shortly after Suga is brought into their household, Yukitomo surprises Tomo with a sudden visit to her bedroom. He makes violent love to her, and she responds "with all her passion." Later she discovers that he was involved in a bloody affair that same night where he had shot and killed an assailant. His coming to Tomo after many months of neglect, then, was not out of love for her but out of fear of displaying to the "young still untouched Suga the full force of his blood-smeared animality". Tomo realizes that she has only been used by him as a "vent to his murderous mental and physical excitement aroused by having killed a
man." She feels for the first time a strong sense of distrust of her husband, who has violeted her long-cherished wish to have a sincere and passionate rapport with him.

Her initial distrust soon starts to change into a critical assessment of his lifestyle and way of thinking when Yukitomo becomes "indecently blatant in his display of affection for Suga." "How could she respect or love the husband who in his conceit and self-indulgence saw nothing more in the self-sacrifice and burning passion of over a dozen years than the loyalty of a faithful servant?" "No longer the wife who obeyed her husband with implicit faith in his judgement," she gradually acquires "the ability to view him ... as another human being," reassessing the very code of conduct that demands complete obedience to such a man.

From then on, chiefly in an effort to prevent the poisonous air emanating from Yukitomo's affairs from contaminating her own small daughter Etsuko, Tomo tries to present "a more energetic front than ever", constantly "on her guard never to show so much as a hair out of the place", working even harder for the good and welfare of her whole family. Hence she does not appear overtly upset when Yukitomo brings in another young girl named Yumi as his second concubine. Tomo is shocked, however, when she learns that Yukitomo has started another affair, this time with Miya, the sensuous young wife of his own son Michimas. "Appalled at her own naivite in assuming that Yukitomo still maintained the same moral code as herself", Tomo is seized by a "seething indignation" never felt before:

The feeling was equally remote from both marital love and marital hatred, a fierce wrath that stood up to Yukitomo, the ungovernable male, who had taken into his keeping Suga, Yumi, and even the offending Miya herself.
It is notable here that Tomo’s idea of the essential manhood incarnated by Yukitomo is similar to that shown by radical feminists in the United States, regarding men and women as completely separate classes, the former constantly dominating the latter. In his act of violation even of the fundamental rules of the ie system to satisfy his own animal desire, Yukitomo reveals his undisguised male ego nourished by the age-old system of men’s domination over women. Tomo’s indignation at this point is of a new kind from that experienced in the past; she is situating herself on the same ground as other oppressed women, regardless of their differences in status.

Nevertheless, Tomo endures all this. She has no other choice. She must persevere and survive for the sake of herself as well as those needing her care and protection—her children, grand-children, and Suga and Yumi.

Years pass, and, one cold wintry day, on her way home from a visit to the house of Yumi, who by now is married to one of Tomo’s distant relatives, Tomo comes to the foot of a gentle slope (namely, onnazaka, or a “woman slope”). Wondering why her feet feel so unusually heavy that day, she slowly goes up the slope. With each step upward, she sees the orange electric light of the lamps from the small houses and shops crowded together on one side of the slope, and wonders if in those small houses can she possibly find the thing that she has been in desperate search of ---”a small happiness, a small comfort.”

Suddenly seized by an unquenchable sadness and sense of futility, Tomo looks back on her whole life:

Everything that she had suffered for, worked for, and won within the restricted sphere of a life whose key she had for decades past entrusted to her wayward husband Yukitomo lay within the confines of that unfeeling, hard, and unassailable fortress summed up by the one word “family” ... by now in the light of the lamps of these small
houses ... she had suddenly seen the futility of that somewhat artificial life...

Her world was a precarious place, a place where one groped one's way through the gloom; where everything one's hand touched was colorless, hard, and cold; where darkness seemed to stretch endlessly ahead.(18)

Critics like Etō and his followers take these thoughts of Tomo at face value, and, passing negative judgement on Tomo's entire life as futile, put the whole blame on Tomo as an individual. My own view is different. I regard Tomo at this point as a person witnessing her whole world based on old artificial belief crumbling before her very eyes, turning into a chaotic space where no meaning or order can be found. In other words, Tomo, in my view, is standing here on similar ground as those existentialist protagonists depicted by Kafka, Camus, or Sartre.

Shortly afterwards, we learn that Tomo is suffering from a serious illness, which will soon put an end to her outwardly unrewarded life. However, the recognition that Tomo has reached here seems to me so significant that I think it should be regarded as worth her lifelong effort — a recognition difficult to attain for women like Tomo, who, equipped with meager education with the "mere elementary ability to read and write."

In fact, the recognition Tomo has reached here is not only of the futility of her own private life or even of the ie system but of the whole ideology and power system that has cruelly controlled her life. It is through the same recognition that Tomo achieves her first inner liberation from that ideology and system which Enchi describes as "the confines of that unfeeling, hard and unassailable fortress summed up by the one word 'family.'" Tomo at this point is allowed to stand outside of it for the first time in her life, being able to look at it critically and objectively.
It is perhaps due to her sense of this awakening that Tomo does not seem to have lost her entire hope at this point: "... at the end of it all a brighter world surely lay waiting, like the light when one finally emerges from a tunnel", "I must not despair, I must walk on ..." So encouraging herself, Tomo drags her feet toward the top of the slope.

6. The meaning of the ending

The above episode marks the conclusion of Tomo's story of awakening. Thereafter, Enchi does not present any explanation about Tomo's inner world, leaving it up to each reader's discretion to grasp what is going on behind her masklike appearance. Immediately after her return home that day, Tomo takes to bed, seriously ill. It appears that her inevitable death is the only impending event ahead. However, there is one more episode right before the concluding scene that deserves our consideration.

After learning about her own fatal illness, Tomo urges Yukitomo to read her own will in her presence. When he does so, he discovers that in her simple childish handwriting Tomo is confessing a long-kept secret; that she has kept a part of Yukitomo's money entrusted to her on her trip to Tokyo, never returning it to him. Tomo begs Yukitomo's forgiveness, and asks him to give the money to her grand-children, as well as to Suga and Yumi, after she dies. On reading this, Yukitomo assures her that she is forgiven and that her wish will be granted. Tomo expresses her cordial gratitude, and soon afterwards drifts into a coma. Moved by the fact that Tomo did not write "a word of complaint" to him but instead apologized him for her own past deed, Yukitomo takes good care of the patient, "as though she were indeed the wife he had cherished all his days."

This is how Tomo is described right before her death. But what on earth can this episode signify to readers? Does Tomo wish to streng-
then her image as an ideal woman of the Meiji era once more before her death? Does she behave like this because she wishes to be taken care of by Yukitomo just once in her lifetime? The final scene which I will examine below, suggests that neither of these interpretations are correct.

When it is clear that she is about to die, Tomo, who has been in a coma, suddenly “opens her eyes wide”, and asks the two women sitting at her deathbed to go immediately and deliver the following message to her husband:

“(Tell him) when I die I want no funeral. (Tell him) all he needs do is to take my body out to sea at Shinagawa and dump it in the water.”(19)

The two women rush to Yukitomo’s room and convey Tomo’s words exactly to him.

The novel finishes with the following brief but impressive sentences that describe the shock Yukitomo feels when he hears those words.

His body had suffered full force of the emotions that his wife had struggled to repress for forty years past. The shock was enough to split his arrogant ego in two.(20)

The rebellious intent of Tomo’s last words should be clear: when Tomo says “I want no funeral”, it obviously signifies her flat refusal to have anything more to do with Yukitomo or his entire ie. Likewise, when she says “take my body out to sea ... and dump it in the water” — especially in the use of the word “dump” ("zanburi") —, we can sense Tomo’s final act of assertion regarding her own body, whose very existence Yukitomo has ignored for so long.

When all this is acknowledged, questions concerning Tomo’s will still
remains. Indeed they appear all the more baffling, now that we know
the fierce rebelliousness Tomo harbors against Yukitomo when she
makes him read her will. Why does not Tomo include a single word of
 complaint to Yukitomo in it? Why does she have to apologize him so
 fastidiously for her minor act of deception when she clearly knows that
he had committed greater evils against her? To find solutions to these
questions, we must look back on the way Tomo has lived her entire life.

As has been suggested before, Tomo has lived a double life — namely,
her outward life represented by the noh mask, and her inner life lived
behind that mask. Enchi makes it clear that the purpose of wearing
such a mask is not so much for Tomo to intentionally deceive others as
to keep a protective front that enables her to be in harmonious relation-
ship with her world, while protecting and even nourishing her turbulent
inner self that could never be accepted by the outside world. As
Simone de Beauvoir maintained, women who allow themselves to be
treated as objects tend to end up turning themselves into objects. In
Tomo’s case, however, through her extraordinary willpower she suc-
cessfully prevents herself from becoming one with her outer mask. She
can even develop her intellectual and emotional capacity into something
richer and more complex, while hiding herself behind her mask. Tomo
does not reveal this change, however, precisely because she cares so
much for the well-being of those close to her, proof of the richness of
her emotional capacity. But the time has arrived when she can finally
break her silence and reveal her inner face to the outside world.

With the above explanation, I hope it is self-evident why Tomo has to
make her husband read her will just before her final overtly rebellious
act. It is in order to heighten the shock effect of her last words to her
husband Yukitomo. In other words, Tomo’s gesture of apology and gra-
titude can be regarded as the final effort on her part to perfect the role
of the ideal wife assigned to her, thus bringing into completion her
hitherto impeccable life as a noh mask—the life of a model Japanese
woman ever self-sacrificing, ever silent. Her attempt indeed is so successful that her entire life as a noh mask almost takes on the status of an exquisite art object (so exquisite that she gratifies Enchi’s male admirers, Etō and Mishima!). The sole purpose of this final gesture was so Tomo can crush this exquisite artwork herself, before her husband’s very eyes.

It is a magnificent performance by Tomo—so magnificent that one is tempted to see her whole life as having been spent in preparation for it. And it was a meaningful one, for its blow was directed not only against Yukitomo but the whole patriarchal tradition of Japan—the tradition of the male-centered ideology and power system—which has imprisoned and exploited the majority of Japanese women through centuries. To be sure, Tomo cannot see the result of her blow with her own eyes. But the fact that she can have one moment of satisfaction after her first act of rebellion is evident in that, when she repeated the word “dump” (“zanburi”), “she uttered it with almost a sense of pleasure”.

Furthermore, Enchi shows how successfully Tomo’s blow works. It does cause a “split” in Yukitomo’s “arrogant ego”. Thus Onnazaka, whose completion took Enchi eight long years, was designed by the author Enchi to be a powerful blow directed against the entire male-centered tradition of Japan, causing a “split” in it, deconstructing it.

7. Uncovering the woman-centered tradition

In an essay written right after she received the Noma Literary Award for Onnazaka, Enchi stated that she wrote the novel as a sort of “women’s tale based on stories women tell each other in secret (onna no hiso-hiso banashi, meaning literally “women’s secret talking”). In fact, if we read her autobiographical story entitled “Hanseiiki” (Half a Decade,) which gives a detailed account of how Onnazaka was written, we can see clearly that what Enchi states in the above-mentioned
essay is true.\(^{(22)}\)

According to "Hanseiiki", Onnazaka is based on Enchi's own grandmother's true story, which the grandmother herself told to Enchi's mother, who in turn told it to Enchi. As to the reason why Enchi could write her grandmother's story with so much empathy, even though her own time and environment were quite distant from her grandmother's, Enchi explains that while writing Onnazaka, she was not in a particularly happy state either as a woman and as a writer; shortly before she started on Onnazaka, she had a hysterectomy; her marital relationship with her husband was much aggravated; in addition, she was suffering from a long 'writer's block', her works having been rejected constantly by major publishers. It was through those experiences, though, that Enchi could develop a deep sympathy toward the average women surrounding her, many of whose lives seemed to be equally unhappy. It was after such recognition that she could start on her new novel.

In the second volume of her autobiographical trilogy, we come across the following passage:

The wretched state which I now find myself in as wife and mother must have been shared by thousands of other women who are leading their lives with their husbands and children. Those women could find no means of escaping from their sorry lot, such as writing...\(^{(23)}\)

And indeed Enchi did have a "means of escaping" — her own writing. Finding in the figure of her grandmother the very embodiment of all those suffering women, Enchi created her unforgettable heroine Tomo. In "Hanseiiki", it is suggested that the figure of her grandmother whom she remembered from her childhood, was also constantly showing "that frustrated look, through whose semi-transparent surface no one was allowed to look in."\(^{(24)}\) Using her own imagination, though, Enchi saw beyond that surface, discovering in it turbulent thoughts and emotions.
which she crystalized in her text of *Onnazaka*.

The writer Takahashi Takako once mentioned that when she met Enchi in person, she had the impression that Enchi herself seemed to be wearing her own mask.\(^{(25)}\) If that is true, it may have been due to the many difficult relationships Enchi had as a woman and a writer. It might be argued that not only Enchi herself but each of her works also dons a mask, none of them allowing any simple readings. It was obviously Enchi’s wish that her readers make their utmost effort to see beyond those masks. And the more fitting readers to do so should be no other than women, for just like *Onnazaka*, the majority of Enchi’s works were obviously written as “women’s tales based on stories women tell each other in secret”, whose more appreciative listeners should be women. By conveying these “women’s tales” to her fellow women readers, Enchi was trying to uncover as well as hand down to future generations of women readers the knowledge of and interest in the hitherto neglected Japanese women’s story, telling about the reality of their own experience which has not received fair hearing in official accounts in Japan.\(^{(26)}\)

Enchi confesses in “*Hanseiki*” that while writing *Onnazaka*, she felt as if she were constantly haunted by her own dead grandmother’s spirit. She might also have been haunted by the countless spirits of those Japanese women who had to die their solitary deaths, without opportunity to express themselves.

Enchi seems to have shown little interest throughout her long writing career in depicting so-called “new women”, who directed their efforts toward establishing positions side-by-side with men in mainstream society. Instead, Enchi focused her attention on those women who, forced to live on the periphery of the society, nevertheless used their willpower to maintain their individual selves. In this respect, Enchi’s stance seems close to that taken by those second-wave U.S. feminist writers trying to establish the so-called “woman-centered tradition” through re-
covering their spiritual legacy from the nameless women of the past who kept their dignity and inner independence with fortitude and perseverance—a search aptly symbolized by the title of Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. Enchi, who successfully revived her own grandmother's unrecorded story shortly after the Second World War, simultaneously summing up the experiences of many nameless Japanese women of the past, was our lonely forerunner of such a search.

Notes

This is a considerably revised version of my own article entitled "Onnazaka—Hangyaku no Kōzo" originally written in Japanese, included in *Onna ga Yomu Nihon Kindai Bungaku* (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 1991).

(1) The title of the book *Onnazaka* this article focuses on literally means "woman slope". This is a traditional epithet for a slope that is gentle and small. "Otokozaka", meaning "man slope", is steep and hard to climb in comparison. The title of the English translation of this work is *The Waiting Years* probably because it is more easily understandable to English readers.

(2) The *ie* system was developed in feudal Japan under the influence of Chinese Confucianism. It regards *ie* (translated either as the family or household) as the most important unit to solidify the unity of the state. According to this system, the continuity of the family is valued above anything else, and hence women were considered as mere receptacles for the next heirs. The possession of concubines by the male family heads was tolerated or even encouraged, for they also could contribute to the continuity of the family by giving birth to sons.


(7) *The Waiting Years*, translated by John Bester (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1980). p. 10. All the quotations from *Onnazaka* in this article are taken from this English translation with some corrections of my own.
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(10) The Freedom and Popular Rights Movement occurred during the 1870’s and the 1880’s under the influence of progressive ideas introduced from Western countries. For detailed information, particularly in relation with women’s role in it, see Sharon L. Livers, *Flowers in Salt* (Stanford: University of California Press, 1983).
(15) In the notoriously reactionary Meiji Civil Code enacted in 1898, women were required to strictly obey the rule of the male family head. They had little access to the rights to own their property or to make decisions concerning their own marriage or divorce. See, for example, Ōno Shigeo and Endō Shin, *Kindai Shōsetsu ni Aruwareta Joseizō* [Women in Modern Novels] (Tokyo: Shūei Shuppan, 1969), p. 69.
(17) *The Waiting Years*, p. 105.
(23) Enchi Fumiko, *Ake o Ubasu Mono : Sanbusaku* [The Thing that Steals the Vermillion: Trilogy], *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū* Vol. 12
(25) Takahashi Takako, “Kamen no Hito”, *Enchi Fumiko Zenshū* Vol. 1 “Geppō” [Supplementary Review], p. 3
(26) This attitude was maintained by Enchi throughout her writing career. The representative work reflecting it in the latter half of her career is *Namamiko Monogatari* (The Tale of a Shrine Maiden), which has as its central character Sadako, a concubine of Fujiwara Michinaga, the most powerful man in the Heian Government. Unlike *Eiga*
Monogatari (The Tale of Glory), a well-known historical narrative focusing mostly on the official life of Michinaga, Namamiko Monogatari deals with the private life of Sada-ko mostly in the form of a private document long hidden but just recovered, thus emphasizing "the private over the public", "the female over the male", and "the subconscious over the phenomenal," to borrow the terms used by Mizuta Noriko in her illuminating analysis of the work in her Hīroin bara Hīro e [From the Heroine to the Hero] (Tokyo: Tabata Shoten, 1982), p. 248.