論　文

Motherhood and eroticism in Okamoto Kanoko's *Portrait of an Old Geisha*

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to examine early-twentieth-century Japanese writer Okamoto Kanoko's *Portrait of an Old Geisha* from the point of view of motherhood and eroticism. After an examination of the historical context of this novel, as well as the history of early feminism in 20th century Japan, and the social and cultural tenets that defined femininity at the time, this article explores how maternity is portrayed in Okamoto's novel, and attempts to reveal the keys that present eroticized motherhood not as a form of perversion, but as a creative, narrative force.

Introduction

Women are often introduced in the public sphere with titles linking them to the two functions that patriarchal systems have assigned them: as *mothers* or as *wives*. These two roles, clearly attached to an "other" (*someone's* mother, *someone's* wife), seem to have been—then as now—the only possible ways of socializing women as sexual beings, by means of attaching them to a given form of identity. Introduced as a wife, a woman is someone who has surrendered the management of her sexuality to the institution of marriage. As a mother, a woman's entity as a sexual being becomes attached to the matter of (re) production. None of these approaches, however, consider the question of womanhood.

Okamoto Kanoko is no exception to this; few are the studies that introduce her without a reference to who she married (cartoonist Okamoto Ippei, 1886-1948) or who she birthed (Okamoto Taro, artist, 1911-1996). In contrast, enigmatic characteristics about her person, such as her adopted name, are seldom taken up as a matter of interest. Born Ōnuki Kano (大貫カノ), she took Ippei's surname upon marriage, and settled for Kanoko (かの子) as a first name after having used a long list of pen names that included Nobara (野薔薇)[1] as well as a version of Kanoko using the kanji for "possible" (可能子). It

is intriguing, to say the least, that Kanoko chose the "child" at the end of her *nom de plume*, and would, rather frequently, use a similar graphism (かの女, *kanojo*, "she/her" in Japanese) when referring to a female character in several of her novels. Relevant keys about womanhood, adulthood, nature and instinct seem to be cyphered in the election of her pseudonym(s), but I also will leave them untouched here.

While it may be difficult to put Okamoto's name at the level of the best-known Japanese female authors during the early twentieth century, such as Enchi Fumiko or Higuchi Ichiyo, it is undeniable that her oeuvre left a profound mark on the literature of her time. We can only imagine the volume and depths that her writing may have reached had she not died relatively young at the age of 49. Okamoto began her literary career writing *tanka*, under the tutelage of Yosano Akiko, and published her first collection of poems, *Karoki Netami* in 1912 with Hiratsuka Raicho's newly founded Bluestocking Society (Suzuki, 2010, pp. 18, 118). She would receive great praise for her work as a poet, particularly for her refined vocabulary and the richness of her style. Okamoto was also a devoted Buddhist scholar, having studied Mahayana Buddhism for most of the 1920s (ibid). It would only be after a long stay in Europe that Okamoto became a novelist, an enterprise she undertook with the boldness of someone who knows herself entitled to achieve great success. From the moment *Tsuru wa yamiki* (鶴は病みき) was published in 1936 until her death four years later, Okamoto wrote prolifically, and many of her works were left to be published posthumously. Among the best-known are *Boshi-jojō* (母子叙情－1937), *Kingyo ryōran* (金魚繚乱－1937), *Shojo Ryuten* (生々流転－1939), and *Rōgijo* (老妓抄－1939, translated as *Portrait of an Old Geisha*).

Regardless of its literary value, the novel that gained her most attention is *Boshi-jojō*, a work to which we will return below. According to Mori (1995, p. 67), with the appearance of this novella, "a daring look at the erotic side of maternal feeling, she was held as a unique talent and her reputation as a fiction writer was assured". Okamoto published an immense array of novels that had no thematic connection to motherhood; nevertheless, she was and continues to be seen as an author whose work is traversed by a sense of "perverse maternity." Taniguchi (2010, p. 47-48), for example, refers to how "in Okamoto's works, the maternal and the erotic are often intertwined and blended inextricably"－some of them, like *Sushi* (1940), present the "devouring, dreadful and (auto)erotic maternal love as an inherent part…of everyday motherhood". Eubanks (2001, p. 286), on the other hand, sees Okamoto as a literary contributor to the ongoing feminist debates of the Tasiho and early Showa periods about motherhood through her rewriting of the myth of *Kishimojin*, the ambivalent mother-goddess of Buddhism.

That Okamoto's literature can often be connected with the issue of motherhood is not a matter of debate, especially when considering the stories

that portray obvious figures of mother and child. However, the need to reconsider several other facets of motherhood arises from this given, and it seems necessary to ask: what kind of motherhood is at stake in her works? And what does her depiction of motherhood say about women? Is motherhood in Okamoto's works always portrayed as the quasi-incestuous relationship of a (devouring) mother and her son? Or is it possible to provide a different reading to the element of eroticism in motherhood? Finally, how does Okamoto contribute to the redefinition of motherhood that took place at the time? This article is an attempt to answer these questions.

The novel selected for this analysis is *Portrait of an Old Geisha*, published a few months before Okamoto's death. Besides being one of Okamoto's best-achieved literary endeavors, it poses an interesting interpretative challenge: on the one hand, a geisha is, by the nature of her job, closer to the latter of the two poles in the classic Madonna-whore Freudian dichotomy, and hence as far from the mother figure as a woman could be. On the other hand, this geisha is an old one, childless and past her reproductive age. The challenge is then to see what a childless, old woman of the "floating world" can tell us about motherhood and eroticism. Indeed, there are opinions that assert that the old geisha is as much of a mother figure as a lover figure, like in many of Okamoto's novels. Yet my point here is slightly different: to argue that in Okamoto's female characters (regardless of whether they are mothers or not) there is a renovated depiction of maternity, one that seeks to place passion, or eroticism, in its many forms, at its center.

This research is not focused on Okamoto's biographical details, in spite of how connected these might seem to her work and how "autobiographic" her depictions of motherhood can be. My interest here is to listen to the literary text as such, and follow what the style chosen by the author, consciously or otherwise, reveals about motherhood and femininity. If anything, the connection of signifiers within the text, guided by free association and hovering attention, the two methodologic cornerstones of Freudian psychoanalysis, will be used for this approach.

Following Bullock's (2010) approach to Japanese women's fiction in the 1970s and the connections she makes between the literary world and the feminist theoretical developments of that era, this article intends to see how literature written by women—in this case, Okamoto Kanoko—during Taisho and early Showa periods, runs parallel to the question of what being a woman is, and how that question was being answered by means of aesthetic creation (*in lieu* of activism). Okamoto can thus be seen as a feminist writer in the sense that the body of her work questions deeply what it means to be a woman, and what motherhood says about femininity.

Before dealing with this novel and the depiction of motherhood that can be found in it, it is necessary to review the historical background of Okamoto's work. During her short life, Okamoto saw the

end of two and the beginning of three Japanese eras, some of them with peculiar characteristics that can shed light on topics like motherhood, which are necessary to understand this author's work.

Meiji Era and the Entrenchment of the "Good Wife, Wise Mother" Ideology

Okamoto was born in 1889, the twenty-second year of the 45-year-long Meiji era, a period of great political, educational, social and economic transformation, whose lasting influence on the country can be still felt nowadays, even after the indelible experience of World War II. This was also a period of intense debates about the participation of women in the project of a nation that was being constructed at the time. As noted by Copeland, the discussion about issues as central as education and morals for women had already been carried out in the 1870s (early Meiji era), when "the status of women had become a central concern for many of the young progressive thinkers of the age" (Copeland, 2000, p. 10). There seemed to be a general consensus at the time about the fact that, in order for Japan to become a *truly* modern nation, educating its women would be an indispensable measure to undertake.[2)]

The concern about women's education in the early Meiji period was closely connected to their integration into the project of the new, modern nation state (Koyama, 2014, p. 86). As social classes were eliminated, and all men were granted a role in the construction of the newly unified Japan—and were subsequently educated to achieve that role—the more difficult task was to determine the position of women in society. While men were redefining their modern selves as members of society, women were to redefine their identity as members of a family, and a new educational ideology needed to be created for this purpose.

Of course, the distinction between the social spheres that were to be inhabited by men and women did not suddenly appear with the modernization of Japan, but "as the pace of social change accelerated from the Meiji period on, and as the norms of family organization, occupations, schooling and government were increasingly challenged, the boundaries between the sexes" (Ericson, 1997, p. 24) also grew stronger.

With the "influence of liberals and Christian thinkers and educators" (Mackie, 2003, p. 24), the promotion of monogamous, heterosexual marriage based on an ideal of companionship began, and according to the nationalist discourse of the era, "the role of women as imperial subjects was seen through the prism of family relationships" (ibid). Women were thus expected to "properly" enter the institution of marriage, to bear children to their husband, and, as the zenith of their role, they were to become the educators of their offspring. With this clearly defined role, the state started "a campaign to promote a separate sphere for women as 'good wives and wise mothers'" (Ericson, 1997, p. 24).

The education system for young women was reformed in 1887 with the purpose of achieving the main goal of

bringing up women that would become good wives and wise mothers, to "nurture a disposition and train talents adequate for the task of rearing children and of managing a household" (Mackie, 2003, p. 24). Thus, the purpose of having basic education both for men and for women was not so much to achieve parity between the sexes, since women continued being economically dependent of their husbands, but very clearly targeted women to properly fulfil their social duty.

Although the role of motherhood is central in the understanding of women in all patriarchal societies, the spin that was given to maternity in the Meiji reform was entirely based on the element of "wisdom" (as the result of education). For example, while up until the Edo period women were seen as "natural breeders", it was also true that they "were not expected to be wise mothers at all" (Koyama, 2014, p. 87, emphasis is mine). The role of the mother was procreation rather than childrearing.[3] The reasons, unfortunately, are less than flattering: being considered less intelligent than men, following the dictums of Confucianism, women were not seen as having the capacity to educate the heirs of a clan (*ie*), and mother's love indeed was perceived as a rather negative thing, possibly hampering the education of children (ibid).

The "good wife, wise mother" ideology, as Koyama (2014) clearly shows, is multifaceted[4] and impacted the creation of the modern woman in many different ways: from its relation to the concept of *kyodotai*, to the incorporation of women into the workforce of the time, and of course with the role of women in the creation of the modern nation-state. However, Koyama also points at how this ideology created a new and long-lasting form of motherhood, and redefined femininity as necessarily connected to motherhood (ibid, p. 86).

What about the other role assigned to women in this ideology, that of good wives? As it stands true for any geopolitical or chronological context ruled by patriarchy, the institution of monogamic marriage works as a container for women's sexuality (and possible concomitant reproduction) within the limits of the father's name. Hence, the "being good" in the "good wife" refers to the monopolization of women's sexuality and their labor force. Referring to the case of the Edo period, Saeki (1998, p. 17) mentions that "the strong repression of the sexual desires of housewives [and, by extrapolation, of mothers] is dictated by the need of a social system to maintain patriarchal lineage. Under this system it is necessary to desexualize women to make them good mothers or housewives" (emphasis is mine).

Precisely the establishment of this dissociation between sexuality and motherhood, and the concomitant elimination of sexuality and thus of womanhood in modern Japan, is what lays behind the ideology of a "wise mother" who will remain undefiled, capable of educating and producing new subjects for the empire, devoid of agency. In the "good wife, wise mother" there is no woman, no sexuality; instead, husband

and child, in a metonymic proximity, are the two real active subjects that set this ideology in motion.

But no ideological tenet remains eternally unchanged, and this would be true for the "good wife, wise mother," which would emerge as the background against which the feminist movements of the Taisho period arose. Let us, then, review the historical background of this period.

Taishō Democracy: Political Shift and Cultural Flourishing

The arrival of the Taishō period (1912-1926) brought about a radical change to the modernizing project of the nation, and produced a new wave of political consciousness that extended to all spheres of society. This "new wave of liberalization […], combined with the emergence of democratic political behavior and institutions, marked a departure from the conservative and authoritarian character of the late Meiji period" (Tokuza, 1999, p. 57).

The reforms of this period consisted first and foremost in a shift in political power: "Under the regime of the Meiji Constitution and the original election law, there was only a narrow margin of political participation for ordinary people. Only men who paid more than 15 yen in annual direct tax were eligible to vote. The cabinets were made up of prime ministers appointed on behalf of the emperor by members of the privy council […]" (Tanaka, 1992, p. 259, author's translation). This began to change in 1913 when the liberal opposition and the press won over the militarist government and the political process of integrating the cabinet with the majority political party in the House of Representatives began to be established (ibid, p. 260). This liberal and democratic trend expanded from the political realm to the social and cultural spheres. As Tokuza (1999, p. 57) points out, although the political shift of the era, the universalization of suffrage for men, was the most important feature of this time, the "spirit of the age […] extended beyond politics to other fields, including economic activities, science, education, literature and journalism, the fine arts and customs and manners".

This new trend of political participation, and the social phenomena it created, is commonly known as "Taishō Democracy," a "rhetorical umbrella that covers an enormous range of dynamic and non-militaristic developments" (Dower, 2012, p. 93), as well as a large array of political changes, from the strengthening of parliamentary politics, the reinforcement of the ties between the corporative interests and the governmental objectives, as well as the apparition of a plethora of social movements, from feminism to labor activism. As Dower (2012, p. 94) puts it, socially and culturally, "Taishō Democracy was [a period] amorphous but equally dynamic" that planted the seeds of what would become the tenants of "modern Japan": urbanization, consumerism, entertainment, publishing for mass audiences […and the] emergence of the bourgeois culture in general".

Taishō period saw the emergence of

the rice riots of 1918, the founding of the Japanese Communist Party in 1922, the great Tokyo earthquake of 1923, the concomitant Kanto massacre (in which some 6000 people, Korean trade unionists and leftist supporters among them, were killed), and the establishment of the right to vote for all men in 1925 (Tanaka, 1992, p. 261). Now, in relation to the literary world, Taishō brought about not only the rise of the proletarian literary movement, but also an explosion of publications made for women, by women.[5)]

Women's magazines were already in circulation at the end of the nineteenth century, but their reach and duration were very limited (Tokuza, 1999, p. 70). In Taishō, on the other hand, given the high rate of literacy (proof of the success of early Meiji educational system), the number and quality of these publications increased (ibid, p. 60). Many of these magazines were devoted at first to domestic matters, self-improvement and ethics consistent with the Meiji dictum of "good wife, wise mother" (ibid, p. 71) but this focus would change to embrace theoretical debates about motherhood in the second decade of 1900s. Let us take a look at this in some detail.

Reconstructing the Narrative of Motherhood: From Women's Magazines to The Debates on *Bosei-shugi*

Although the democratic air of the times brought about new advances to feminist thought, the issue of motherhood remained at the center of most female intellectuals and artists of the time. To borrow Mae's words, "it seems that the centripetal policies of national identity, which focused upon a powerful maternal identity and family ideology, constituted a trap impossible to resist even for those women who took a critical view of the state from a female standpoint" (2014, p. 76). Very few were the feminists, intellectuals, writers or activists of the time who escaped this perspective, or who considered the question of womanhood outside of the realm of the house. This, of course, was made even harder by the governmental measures that limited the participation of women in the political arena, literally confining them to their homes and the roles of childcare and family serving.[6)]

Deprived of access to the agora, illustrated women of the time took to the pen, and delivered their discussions about motherhood on the pages of the newly created "magazines for women," such as the pivotal magazine *Seitō* (Bluestocking). Founded in 1911 by Hiratsuka Raichō, *Seitō* was published periodically between 1911 and 1916, and it would become a major forum for debates over the "new women" (Rodd, 1991, p. 176). Although at the beginning it had a clear literary focus and published mostly novels, poems and literary pieces on the problems of modern women, in later stages it dealt directly with political and social problems, including issues related to the family system and women's suffrage. Many women who contributed to the pages of *Seitō* would later became part of the historical *Shin Fujin Kyōkai* movement (Tokuza, 1999, p. 71).

The founder of *Seitō*, Hiratsuka

Raicho, created the magazine, in principle, with the purpose of promoting unknown women writers. According to Tanaka, Hiratsuka's main aim for the magazine was to determine what was authentically feminine in each woman (1992, p. 273). This interest in femininity as multifaceted, as something that is in permanent redefinition or, ultimately, as an open question, and the fact that the magazine was conceived as a space to answer that question from various viewpoints is, without a doubt, incredibly visionary.

In 1907, Okamoto met Hitatsuka Raicho, and was immediately invited to be part of the early contributors of the magazine, which later published a collection of Okamoto's *tanka* poems. According to Mori (1995, p. 76), Okamoto was deeply moved by Hiratsuka's inaugural text, by its call to discover one's own brilliance and to liberate the feminine genius. But when the interests of the magazine turned toward social and political issues, Okamoto and other "individualists" began to drift away from the group. Of course, her involvement in the magazine and her closeness to *Seitō*'s "new women" helped create in Okamoto an awareness of female oppression and sexual inequality. While her sympathy with the feminist movement was never greater than her individualistic and apolitical orientation, her literature would become a feminist critique, more intuitive than ideological, of the doctrine of female inferiority or the conformism of the social roles assigned to women of her time.

It is true that Okamoto was not a feminist like the activists of the 1920s. But neither can it be denied that the very aesthetics of her work is a form of criticism of the society of her time. Her prose is crisscrossed by the desire to abandon female subjugation, to transform the situation of women, a permanent questioning of motherhood, and a protest against the few options offered to women. The erotic and eccentric tone of her work can be seen as a slap in the face of the traditional and puritanical values demanded of women (Mori, 1995, 75).

Hiratsuka was, along with Yosano Aikiko and Yamakawa Kikue, one of the main participants in a heated discussion over the protection of motherhood that took place between 1918 and 1919. The controversy began with an article by Yosano in which she advocated for "a feminism grounded in equal legal, educational, and social rights and responsibilities for women" (Rodd, 1991, p. 176). She disagreed with the European feminism that demanded special economic protection for women, and argued strongly in favor of women's financial independence from their husbands. Hiratsuka, on the other hand, "propounded a doctrine of motherhood that called for state protection of and special privileges for mothers" (ibid). Hiratsuka believed that state protection of motherhood was not a form of discrimination but a liberation from it, and would ensure the social being of a mother, instead of an isolated existence as such. Finally, Yamakawa, who had a clearly socialist perspective, saw the value in both arguments for economic

independence and maternal protection, but saw "women's subordination to the system of private property and so set the destruction of that system as her goal" (ibid). This controversy highlights issues that are still unresolved today, and have remained at the core of the question about motherhood.

As pointed by Eubanks in her introduction to the translation of Okamoto's *Kishimonjin*, Okamoto was not one of the direct participants of the debate about motherhood protection debates, but her views on maternity, obvious in works like the aforementioned one, can be considered a literary contribution to this debate. "Rather than argue for any sort of reconciliation between individual desire and social role, however, these two authors widen the debate to include a fourth position: an attack on the social role of motherhood itself. Both authors use the mythical Buddhist figure of Kishimo as the dominant image in their stories, revising the traditional tale in certain ways so as to cast Kishimo as, at best, an ambivalent mother" (Eubanks, 2001, p. 288).

For Okamoto, as for many women of the Japanese intellectual elite of the time, the "good wife, wise mother" doctrine, which imposed on them the obligation of a monogamous and subjugated relationship, as well as the demands of housework and child rearing, were perceived as a threat to her literary ambitions and her creativity (Mori, 1995, p. 84). In her real life, Okamoto rebelled against social dictum by opposing her husband's extravagant lifestyle, and by bringing her young lovers to live in the family home, which no doubt must have aroused countless comments regarding Okamoto's mental health and the state of the marriage. But it was not only in her life that Okamoto rebelled against patriarchal dictum: she also did so through the depiction of eroticized characters with maternal traits. This is the theme that appears in *Portrait of an Old Geisha*, which we will discuss next.

Portrait of a Relentless, Maternal Old Geisha

Portrait of an Old Geisha (Okamoto, 1997),[7] published in 1938 shortly before Okamoto's death, is considered by many to be her paramount work as a novelist, both in terms of the stylistic achievement and the weaving of the inner world of the main character, Kosono. This novella was hailed by Keene, surely in a gesture of deference, as "the finest achievement" of this "minor but unforgettable writer", a piece in which she "she seems to have surmounted her fascination with herself and taken a firm step in the direction of becoming a writer of substance" (Keene, pp. 1128-1129).

The story is not narrated from the viewpoint of Kosono, the old geisha and protagonist of the novel, but that of Kosono's former *tanka* teacher,[8] a woman younger than the geisha and who sees her as a mystery of sorts: a cheerful storyteller, sometimes capable of plunging into a sudden melancholy, sometimes able of making her companions burst out laughing.

Kosono is described as a woman of several interests, dabbling in one kind of

knowledge and then a new one, learning how to write poetry in a new style, or how to play a new instrument. This whimsical trait, the insatiable curiosity, makes her a volatile and inapprehensible character, and perhaps even gives her a childish air that takes away several of her many years. We will go back to this point later. However, we know for certain that Kosono is no longer young. Retired from her profession, after having had multiple suitors and lovers, Kosono adopts the daughter of distant relatives (Michiko), and leaves her free to learn whatever she wants. That this is an indication of her desire to live a "more settled way of life" (p. 81) is revealed by the narrator herself, but it might not necessarily mean that there is any desire for succession towards her "adopted" child, nor is there any indication that she wishes to pass onto her the knowledge of the successful geisha. No indication of a "wise mother" who assumes the role of the educator is seen in Kosono, and all references to learning are connected to the old geisha.

In addition to Michiko, Yuki, a young electrician's assistant who helps occasionally with the multiple repairs in the house and wishes to become an inventor, is invited to join them at their residence (p. 83). Kosono welcomes him and becomes his benefactor, providing him with the necessary means to live and to create at will. Is this welcoming gesture a portrayal of yet another "too extreme, even by Japanese standards" (Taniguchi, 2010, p. 47) mother/son relationship? The English translation seems to hint at the fact that it is indeed a mother-son like relationship ("Kosono was like a mother to Yuki", p. 84). However, although it is tempting to assume that the relationship between the old geisha and the young man is a depiction close to the one in *Boshi-jojō*, they neither resemble each other, nor does either depict a perverse mother.

Kosono invites the young man to live under her roof, after an exchange that reveals one of the keys to understand the psychological intricacies of these characters. The exchange begins with the old geisha's admiration of the "wonders of modern civilization," namely electricity.[9)]

> 'Your work's kind of slapdash you know, Yuki,' Kosono said to him one day as he was fixing yet another appliance that had broken down. She had gotten into the habit of kidding him. 'It never lasts more than a week.'
>
> 'Can't help it. I'm bored. I just can't get a charge out of this line of work'［こんなつまらない仕事は、パッションが起らない］
>
> 'What do you mean by that?'［パッションって何だい］
>
> 'Why, you know—I guess you don't, after all. Folks in your world would say it just isn't sexy enough'［いろ気が起こらない］
>
> It occurred to the old geisha then how empty［憐れみの心が起つた］her own life had been. She was reminded of all the parties she had been to, all the men she had known, and not one had really 'charged' her［そのパッションとやら起らずに］(p. 82).

Yuki complains that he feels no "passion" for his work, and when interpellated by the geisha, rephrases this idea by using the word *iroke*, which would be closer in meaning to sensuality, and that I will purposefully consider here as bearing the meaning of "eroticism". His job as an electrician brings no passion to his life, and instead of such boring work he would like to "become an inventor and live off the proceeds from his patents" (p. 82). Kosono, then, is quick to provide a helping hand, and allows him to move into their place, without a worry about his livelihood and with all guarantees to think and create. However, soon enough, "Yuki had lost interest in his work" [熱意を失われた] (p. 85) and "discovered how tedious and distasteful the whole business was" (ibid). Provided with the means and the possibility, Yuki would find himself, again, lacking in passion: "It seemed that, try as he might, Yuki could find no burning passion within himself" (ibid) [いくら探してみてもこれ以上の慾が自分に起りそうもない].

Let us pay close attention to the duplicity of "passions" that are revealed here.[10] On the one hand, we find *passion*, not in its most common translation (情熱－*jōnetsu*, a word that never appears in the text), but as eroticism (*iroke*). This eroticism is the reiteration that Yuki chooses (quite correctly) to denote the drive of the geisha. On the other hand, there is passion that is lacking from Yuki's life (the lack of lack), a passion that is interest (熱意－*netsui*) or want (慾－*yoku*), but not eroticism.

Unlike the young man, the geisha is not deprived of an impetus in life, and seems indeed to be signed by an unstoppable wish to know, to move, "like a snake that keeps shedding its skin and moving on" (p. 93). This is evident in the feeling that is brought about when the word "passion" enters the conversation: remembering her past life, Kosono thinks about her lovers and notices with a feeling that is not of "emptiness" but rather of "*compassion*" (*awaremi*) that none of the men in her life had ever instilled the passion that Yuki complains about lacking. In the psychoanalytic sense of the word, the *eros* (*iroke*) evoked in the aforementioned exchange does not necessarily refer to any concrete type of sexual encounter, but rather to a pulsion (drive) that moves towards construction, and that opposes the drive of destruction (*thanatos*).

Kosono seems to be in constant movement, perpetually wishing to know, to find. "She flew from one thing to another, impelled by a curious cycle of satiation and desire to consume the new, the unknown" (p. 86). But what is the old geisha always "looking for"? Where is this unfulfillable desire pulling her towards? To affirm that the desire of this character is aiming towards one concrete objective, or an ideal of that objective, would be to deny the weight born by the character's words. Let us pay close attention to how the objectless desired is described by the author in the first part of the novel:

> ['A]ll said and done, no matter how many men we've known, we're always looking for just one. What's

attracted me to this or that one has always been bits and pieces, just fragments of the man I've been looking for all my life. That's why none of them has lasted very long'.
'Who is it you're looking for, then?'

'If I knew that, I'd never have suffered. Maybe it was my first love, or maybe the man I've yet to meet' (p. 80).

Not only does the old geisha refuse the quest for the one man who could satiate her desire, she is actually aware that there is no one man who could contain what she looks for. And yet, she persists. Without denying the suffering that is brought about by permanent quest for what she *desires* ("No matter how many affairs I've had, they've always ended up the same—I've had nothing but pain. Whether it's love or work, you have to throw yourself heart and soul into it," p. 92), the old geisha does not desist in her quest, and far from making an apology of suffering, she ends the novella with a poem that testifies to the richness of her experiences:

年々にわが悲しみは深くして
いよよ華やぐいのちなりけり

With each year, my sorrow deepens
And my life brightens[11)]

This "brightness" in spite of the "sorrow" can be seen as connected to a refusal to complete the always unfilled "opening" that is desire, to fill it with a plug that, in the case of maternity, would be a child. Okamoto refuses this view of "completed motherhood"—no matter how maternal her characters may be—as much as she rejects the completion of womanhood with the monogamous partner. She refuses universalization: Kosono's being "as a mother" is the being of the eternally open and insatiable curiosity.

Motherhood and Eroticism: Connection and Narrative

We have seen how in *Portrait of an Old Geisha*, the "motherlike" trait, one that would be similar to the ideal of "wise mother" enforced by the government at the time, is abandoned in favor of a sense of "eternal movement", a creative discontent, an erotic drive, in the Freudian sense. I would like to make a reference to these two elements, motherhood and eroticism, making use of Julia Kristeva's notion of *reliance*, or maternal eroticism.

To think about the maternal as erotic can, to say the least, be provocative, especially when motherhood is often seen rather as a form of fulfillment of a "vital need"; in the social context of Taishō Japanese society, this vital need was primarily a *social* one. But even in theoretical fields like psychoanalysis, which deals directly with sexuality as the foundation of unconscious psychic life, it is not infrequent to find the mistaken understanding that "psychoanalysis assigns sexuality exclusively to the lover [in Plato's sense] and the unbearable destiny of object relations to the

maternal" (Kristeva, 2014, p. 69). When Kristeva denounces this misunderstanding, she is openly criticizing a view of motherhood as fulfilled by a child/object who would "complete" women.[12)]

Kristeva (2014) defines maternal eroticism as "a state of emergency of life" (p. 73), a force that is always embedded in the psycho-somatic landscape of human beings, and which can translate the libidinal energy into a passion; maternal eroticism connects the poles of erotic drive and death drive, and allows for an ambivalence that liberates the subject from falling into either of the two poles. For Kristeva, maternal eroticism exists not only in relation to the child (or for the child) but is rather an aspect inherent to the mother herself, as a subject.

This ambivalent character of maternal eroticism, is what allows Kristeva to call it "reliance", not only in the English sense of the word (as trust) but in the French one: as a re-connection, a permanently oscillating movement: "Always inside and outside, self and other, neither self nor other, an intervening space, maternal eroticism separates and rejoins [*relie*]: hiatus and junction" (Kristeva, 2014, p. 76).

This mobile, conflicting form of motherhood, that joins opposed poles and keeps the erotic and thanatic energies in balance, seems to pervade Okamoto's writings. Let us take, for example, the case of *Boshi-jojō* (母子叙情). This novel describes the (without a doubt, erotically) conflicted feelings of a woman for her son, who is away from her. The melancholic feeling towards the absent son, and a veiled erotic tone underlying maternal love are the two of the obvious motifs of this novel. In the midst of her nostalgia for her son, the woman sees a young man who resembles her son, and decides to pursue him, enraptured by a dual feeling, both motherly and erotic. In the novel, however, there is no breaking of the incest taboo and any encounter remains in the oedipal register of prohibition (i.e. there is no relation between the older woman and the young man).

In a time when the sacredness of motherhood seemed to have taken possession, and "good mothers" were the only kind of mothers who could exist, Okamoto depicted a heroine that hails herself an unwise one, defying with her depiction the call of society of her time. Okamoto's heroine is not a victim nor a hero of her constitution as a desiring mother: she sees herself as alive in the conflict of motherhood. This is obvious when she refuses to accept that her being as a mother is parallel in any way to the designated "good" mother, and feels the disgust of having her conflicted feelings towards her son equivalated to a "common narrative":

> その中年夫人は黙っているかの女に、なおも子供の事業のため犠牲になって貢ぐ**賢母**である、というふうな讃辞をしきりに投げかけた。[…] その賢夫人が帰って、独りになってみると、反対に、にがにがしさを持て剰あました。つまり夫人がかの女を、世間**普通の賢母**と同列に置いた見当違いが、かの女を焦立いらだたせた。それは遠い昔、たった一つしたかの女のいのちがけの、辛つらい悲しい**恋物語**を、ふざけた浮気筋や、

出世の近道の男釣りの経歴と一緒に噂うわさされる心外な不愉快さに同じだった。

She remained silent while this middle-aged matron continued complimenting her about what an **extraordinary mother** she was and how good it was of her to make sacrifices just for her son's career. […] Only after the woman left did her feelings change to something more like disgust. She was really infuriated that the woman hadn't the sense to realize that she was not the run-of-the-mill **"good mother"**. […] It was as if someone had taken the single sad, wrenching **love of her life**, the one she had risked everything for, and degraded it into something like a farcical, tawdry sexual encounter or a gold digger's story (Okamoto, 1982, p. 52).

It is a pity that the English version chooses the expression "love of her life" to translate the "love narrative" (*koi-monogatari*) that seems to have been betrayed when the protagonist is complimented for being a "wise mother", because there is a key element present in the original Japanese expression: What is important in the character's being as a mother is the fact that she is constructing a ***narrative*** of motherhood. It is not only her being of a mother, nor her worth as a mother; the erotic trait of mother pushes her to write, to narrate, to construct, to create.

The title of this novella is not, as suggested in the translation, *A mother's love*, nor *The relationship of mother and child*, as it has been suggested. The title, quite specifically includes the word 叙情, lyricism, suggesting that what matters here is the narrative or the poetics of motherhood, and not the relation between them, nor the feeling or the sentimentality that could be attached to it. I would like to assert here that the erotic motherhood present in Okamoto Kanoko's works is the element that makes it possible for her female characters to create, to pursue, to seek, to be in constant, creative, movement. In Okamoto's writings the question of "what is a mother" does not obliterate the question of "what is a woman", but rather faces it and leaves it open for its readers to answer it.

The kind of motherhood that I have tried to track in Okamoto's work is not the maternity defined by the actual relation mother/child (and thus in reference to the Kleinian readings of Okamoto's oeuvre such as Taniguchi's (2010)), but rather to a force that is more determinant than the object it is aimed towards. This view of motherhood, as eroticized, is what makes narrative, and, in the same way, a creative view of femininity, possible.

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Note

1) It is discussed whether "Nobara" was a

pseudonym used only by Kanoko or whether it was shared with her brother, Shōsen (for more on her pseudonyms, see Yamaguchi (1997, p. 5, 7) and Mori (1995, p. 73). Shōsen is another well used external reference to Kanoko's identity due to his friendship/rivalry with Natsume Sōseki and the influence he/they might have had on Okamoto as a writer.

2) The fact that basic (and free, from 1899) education was guaranteed for all subjects of the Emperor was without a doubt an element in favor of the homogenization of Japanese society, as classes were eliminated. However, it must be noted that this homogenization came hand in hand with the propagation of a militaristic ideology, especially with the proclamation of the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890, and with a severe delay of access to superior education for women (cf. Tokuza, 1999, p. 54).

3) For a detailed account of the evolution of childrearing tasks see Uno, K. (1991). The household division of labor. In G. L. Berstein (Ed.), *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (pp. 17-41). University of California Press.

4) Tokuza (1999, p. 55) also refers to this multiplicity of interpretations of the "good wife, wise mother" ideology, referring to them as the consequence of the discrepancies between the official understanding of this principle (as militarizing tool) and the approach that Western-influenced scholars had to it.

5) For a detailed account of the boom of women's magazines in the early twentieth century see Ericson (1997), particularly chapter 3, Women's Journals.

6) Even throughout the democratic period of Taisho, women were forbidden from congregating in public spaces, an issue that many feminists fought against.

7) All references to the novel in this section will be shortened to page number only. Modifications to the Oxford translation will be indicated. All English translations are contrasted against the Japanese version on the online Aozora database (aozora.gr.jp).

8) The way in which the character of the narrator, the poetry teacher, vanishes into the background of the story after a couple of episodes, only to reappear at the end of the novel when she takes the credit for "editing" Kosono's last poem, is in and of itself a work of truly fantastic narrative.

9) It is noteworthy that the translator, Cody Poulton, chose to express this admiration with an openly sexual metaphor ("Electricity's like sex", p. 81), when Okamoto simply referred to negative and positive poles, and to a matter of compatibility (人間の相性). The electricity/sex metaphor will drag onto the following lines of the translation with expressions like "charge", etc., and the original sense of passion (パッション) and eroticism (いろ気) will be unfortunately lost.

10) Noda's (2013) examination of the use of the concept of "passion" in this novel is both very rigorous and quite illuminating, but diverges from the meaning of passion as eroticism in favor of a religious interpretation of the concept, closer to *suffering*.

11) Translation is mine. My appreciation to A. Elliott for his suggestions.

12) In his seminar about object relation,

when dealing with the voracity of the mother, Lacan notes that the woman is never "fulfilled" by the child. For Lacan, the mother refers to something always unsettling, for she is never a woman whose lack seems to have been "resolved". Cf. Fajnwaks, F. and C. Leguil (2015), p. 76.