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Lesbian Suicide and Shortcomings of Socialism in Interwar Japan

Scott Reynen

Until we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.

- bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*.

There were 342 cases of “female same-sex double (or ‘love’) suicide” reported in the Japanese daily press between 1925 and 1935 (Komine 1985). Assuming unreported and individual cases, the actual number of lesbian suicides during this period was probably much higher than twice this number. Still, these recorded lesbian double suicides alone constitute about thirty-one percent of all suicides in Japan during this time period (Komine 1985, 174-5). The disproportionately high rate of suicide among lesbians in interwar Japan is an indication of widespread exclusion of lesbians from the social and economic trends during this time.

Komine’s research of this phenomenon indicates that Japanese took note of the high rate of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan as an irregularity. Psychologist Yasuda Tokutaro asked in 1935, “Why are there so many lesbian double suicides reported in the society column of the daily newspaper? One can only infer that females these days are monopolizing homosexuality” (Robertson, *Takarazuka* 192). The lack of similar studies or public commentary before or after the interwar period in Japan suggests that the frequency of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan was in contrast to lower (and less notable) rates both preceding and following this period.

Robertson makes the only modern attempt to account for the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan. She concludes: “Lesbian double suicides and attempted suicides were predicated on – and both used and criticized as a trope for – a revolt against the normalizing functions of tradition (qtd the Good Wife, Wise Mother) as sanctioned by the civil code” (“Dying to Tell,” 15). Robertson calls the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan “an effective way to get controversial ideas into print and integrated with the popular discourse of sexuality” (“Dying to Tell,” 15). However, Robertson neglects to mention how ineffective these

suicides were in changing the very conditions from which they arose. That these double suicides were repeated at an average interval of ten days over a period of ten years suggests that as a supposed method of political dissent this practice was ultimately unsuccessful in creating positive change in society to halt the suicides themselves.

The popular discourse of interwar Japan changed in its inclusion of discussion of lesbianism; however, such discussion was overwhelmingly negative (Fruhstuck). Thus, while the suicides may be viewed as successful in communicating political dissent, the dissent had no positive outcome. Effective political dissent brings change, and lesbian suicide in interwar Japan did not bring change for Japanese lesbians. The dominant ideologies affecting lesbians in Japan today are still not significantly different from those of interwar Japan; lesbians continue to be excluded from major trends in Japanese society (ILGA).

Robertson's explanation emphasizes the role of dominant ideologies of interwar Japan, e.g. "Good Wife, Wise Mother," in prompting lesbian suicide; however, ideologies alone do not prompt suicide. Behind every apparently ideological suicide are tangible living conditions sufficiently unpleasant to make death an appealing alternative to life. The vast majority of people – even those burdened by the very ideologies Robertson discusses – prefer life to death. Whatever the varying explicit statement accompanying suicides, the unvaried implicit statement is always that the subject's life is believed to be worse than death. To explain a suicide, one must explain what factors made life so undesirable for the subject.

However, even if one focuses on only explicit suicide statements as Robertson does, her explanation could only account for a small fraction of Japanese lesbian suicides in interwar Japan. The majority of interwar Japanese lesbians had neither the wealth nor fame to anticipate that their suicide would have some positive impact on the ideologies concerning lesbians in interwar Japan. A politically motivated suicide presupposes a political voice and the majority of lesbians in interwar Japan had no such voice. Robertson's analysis prompts a new question of how the practical application of "tradition" for Japanese lesbians was notably different than that of the rest of Japanese society – and especially other oppressed groups – who shared the same tradition yet expressed or withheld dissent by some other means than suicide.

The will to commit suicide arose most directly from material conditions in the lives of lesbians in interwar Japan, rather than the abstract ideologies such as “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” which were not specific to these women. An examination focused primarily on the material conditions of life for lesbians in interwar Japan reveals a more convincing explanation of the phenomenon of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan. Specifically, it can be shown that lesbians of interwar Japan were excluded from the benefits of industrial modernization *and* that the socialist movement proved deficient in addressing the negative effects of industrialization on the lives of Japanese lesbians.

Before examining the particular relationships between socialism and lesbianism, lesbian suicide in interwar Japan must be understood in its historical context. Although Japan is often cited as a “suicide nation,” suicide rates in Japan have actually been lower than rates in Denmark and Austria (Pinguet 14). Japan’s image as a “suicide nation” comes from the especially public reaction to suicide in Japan rather than statistically higher rates. Suicide has been idealized in Japan because of the voluntary deaths of famous Japanese and the public discourse concerning these deaths throughout history (see Pinguet). Thus Japan’s “suicide nation” status does not help to explain disproportionately high rates of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan.

Instead, the history of suicide in Japan indicates that suicide functions as an indication of broader problems in Japanese society. “Suicide is a symptom, that is, a surface result of factors uncontrolled by the subject [...] It is a rejection: firstly of a given situation, but beyond that, a blanket judgment on the value of life” (Pinguet 35). The high rate of lesbian suicide in interwar Japan is symptomatic of factors in larger Japanese society that made life unbearable for lesbians. Identifying these factors and their real effects on the lives of lesbians in interwar Japan will provide a basis from which to explain the suicides.

The scarcity of historical documents – and the consequent scarcity of contemporary research – regarding lesbianism in Japanese history makes understanding interwar Japanese lesbianism within historical context difficult. “In traditional Japanese society homosexual behavior was viewed as a diversion or a hobby that was separate from one’s serious procreative duties and public identities” and was therefore rarely a topic of discussion (Hawkins 37). Lesbianism was not historically

part of the popular Japanese discourse, and interwar Japan was the time period in which lesbianism entered the public discourse. Within this context, lesbian suicide in interwar Japan can be viewed as a result of major changes in Japanese society.

The interwar period in Japan was marked by the Taisho (1912-26) and early Showa (1926-89) government's failure to effectively deal with the problems brought about by rapid industrialization. For example: in 1920 a financial panic followed the industry boom associated with the First World War, the Great Kanto Earthquake and Fire of 1923 again destabilized economic development, and the Showa Panic of 1927 and the Showa Depression of 1930 continued the regular pattern of economic fluctuation. The government was generally unresponsive, or even repressive, regarding the public demonstrations of dissatisfaction that accompanied these major economic problems.

Lesbian relationships depend practically on the economic independence of women; and industrialization, as administered by the interwar Japanese government, failed to achieve such independence. Women, and particularly unmarried women, were especially vulnerable to economic instability. Because women were more frequently the first to be fired during economic recessions, the proportion of female workers in the total factory workforce fell below fifty percent for the first time in 1933 (Nakamura 13). Female participation in the workforce continued to fall until the end of the Second World War (Miyake 282). The lesbians committing suicide were most often factory workers by trade (Robertson 13) and were thus part of the high number of newly unemployed women. Over eighty-one percent of women who *were* able to work were married to men (Nakamura 120), and while marriage is certainly not a clear indication of heterosexuality, it made actual practice of lesbianism less feasible. Lesbian women made up a disproportionately large segment of the unemployed but could least afford unemployment.

Lesbians were unable to financially support each other at levels of economic stability comparable to those found within the social and economic standard of heterosexual marriage. Women "strongly desired to find jobs of whatever kind, even at low wages, because the family budget could not be balanced otherwise" (Nakamura 127). However, women's contribution to a "family budget" was only balanced by the larger income of a husband. Two women generally could not sustain themselves within a "family budget" constituted of only lower female income

levels.

Women could only temporarily afford to live outside of a married relationship with an employed man. “Considered auxiliary, female labour has provided the source of supplementary income for the household. For these reasons, women’s wages have invariably been low and working conditions poor” (Nakamura 193). The disparity between male and female income levels and the heterosexist assumption of a “family budget” meant that lesbian women were generally excluded from even the precarious Japanese interwar economic system. The inability to earn living wages increased the likelihood of suicide (Pinguet 30).

At the same time, industrial working conditions for women in many ways encouraged sexual relationships between women. Young women were often removed from rural homes and brought to an unfamiliar urban environment (see Molony), where they were required to live in company dormitories (Nakamura 194-5). Such practices gave women increased opportunity to form sexual relationships with other women; and separation from men made male-female sexual relationships a less realizable alternative. Sharing harsh working conditions also encouraged women to form close relationships. Fruhstuck writes:

In the morning one could find at least 30 percent of the girls in “strange positions,” another 30 percent had unintentionally embraced each other while sleeping, and 40 percent had intentionally done so. Hosoi concluded “The phenomenon of lesbianism is quite common and includes a wide range of practices [...]” (343).

The modernization of industry in interwar Japan encouraged sexual relationships between women, but the economic realization of lesbian relationships was nearly impossible. This conclusion contradicts Hawkins’ assertion that “Urbanization led to a breakdown of the traditional segregation of the sexes, as men and women mingled freely in the new environment” (38). While men and women *did* mingle freely as consumers in a newly industrialized Japan, the working conditions which allowed such consumerism, and which had a more significant impact on people’s lives, were commonly segregated by gender.

The relationship between Yuriko Nakajo and Yoshiko Yuasa was a rare exception to the difficulty of economically maintaining a lesbian relationship in interwar Japan. After this relationship had ended, Yoshiko observed “Being able to support each other, to fill each other’s various needs, we had it pretty good” (Hitomi

28). It was not until the conclusion of the relationship that Yoshiko was able to gain some comparative perspective and realized how difficult it was for two women in interwar Japan to support each other, particularly economically.

The relationship of Yuriko and Yoshiko is also an example of how socialism affected the lives of lesbian women in interwar Japan. Socialism was the popular response to the problems of industrialization in interwar Japan, and it successfully challenged many of the government policies responsible for such problems. Nonetheless, it failed to address the specific problems of lesbians. Hitomi describes conditions under which Yuriko and Yoshiko's relationship ended:

During this period, where Yuriko threw herself into the wider stream of history as a left activist, she also abandoned the woman's friendship that she had shared with Yoshiko and chose the love of the man Kenji. It seems that even her love was to be revolutionary. It would not be an unnatural, decadent love, "perched on a board laid over a ditch," like [that of cross-dressing women] they had seen in Berlin, but a healthy, natural productive, revolutionary love like [that of the woman's committee chairman with her family] they had seen in the Soviet Union. Running to join Kenji, Yuriko brushed Yoshiko aside with the words, "You are not my tavarisch [Russian for 'comrade']" (27).

Lesbianism, at least in Yuriko's view, was incompatible with socialist revolution. While socialist movement was not inherently exclusive to patriarchal heterosexist promotion of economic rights, such patterns in practice are not difficult to find. The practical exclusion of lesbians from the socialist movement was the ironic result of lesbian exclusion from industrialization.

For many within the interwar Japanese socialist movement, women were not seen as true members of the working class, and their status as *oppressed women* was insignificant or even antagonistic within the framework of socialism. This view of women as non-workers not only granted lower importance to non-economic forms of oppression, but also contradicted reality in the existence of successful strikes by female workers *despite* patterns of exclusion from larger socialist movement (Molony 224). Socialist movement's failure to adequately address the very immediate need for women's economic independence likely hurt not only interwar Japanese women, and particularly lesbians, but also socialist movement itself.

In some cases socialism was not only seemingly apathetic toward the need of Japanese lesbians, but also in direct opposition to homosexuality. Pflugfelder describes the antagonism many Japanese socialists held toward homosexuality.

To expose the inequities of the current social system, thus helping to generate support for socialism, was one of the objectives of the proletarian literary movement, which enjoyed its heyday during the 1920's and 1930's. In the writings of this school, as in the works of Morita and Sakai, "same-sex love" offered a convenient emblem for the structural defects of contemporary society (309).

Rather than employing the exclusion of homosexuals from the benefits of industrialization as a critique of capitalism, Japanese socialists used homosexuality itself as a symbol of the failures of industrialization, suggesting, as Yuriko did, that under an ideal socialist economic system, homosexuality would not exist. Socialism by no means invented heterosexism, but adopted such oppressive attitudes from larger society instead of confronting them.

Some of the patriarchy within socialist movement can be attributed directly to the interwar Japanese government. Article 5 of the Police Security Regulations banned women from participation in the *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei* [Japanese Socialist Federation] (Hane 126), the primary socialist organization in interwar Japan. The exclusion of women from the *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei* meant in practice the exclusion of women from smaller associated associations. This law can not fully explain patriarchy within interwar Japanese socialist movement, however, because laws restricting socialist organizations were frequently broken. The decision to obey this particular law indicates that women were not fully valued in the socialist movement.

Another example of the socialist readiness to adopt male dominant rhetoric can be seen in the manifesto of the *Sekirankai* [Red Wave Society]. The *Sekirankai* was a separate women's socialist group formed in reaction to the legal exclusion of women from the *Nihon Shakaishugi Doumei*. The manifesto reads, in part:

Women and workers have endured together a history of oppression and ignorance [...] The capitalist society turns us into slaves at home and oppresses us as wage slaves outside the home. It turns many of our sisters into prostitutes. Its imperialistic ambitions rob us of our beloved fathers, children, sweethearts, and brothers and turn them into cannon fodder [...] Socialism offers

the only way to save mankind from the oppression and abuses of capitalism. Women who wish to be liberated, join the Sekirankai! (Hane 126-7).

The manifesto acknowledges gender-structured oppression of women, but clearly prioritizes the effects of capitalism on *male* workers. The very mention of “women and workers” subtly implies that women *were not* workers. The oppression of women as “slaves at home” or as prostitutes is also acknowledged, but without any indication that the very fathers, sweethearts and brothers the *Sekirankai* sought to liberate were primarily responsible for such oppression. Women were asked to join socialist movement primarily to fight the economic oppression of men, and only secondarily to fight their own gender-structured oppression. Socialism, as exemplified by the *Sekirankai*, failed to apply the same critical analysis of oppression toward patriarchy that was applied to capitalism.

Kutsumi Fusako’s involvement in socialist movement involved similar irony. Kutsumi, like many socialist women, was married to a socialist husband, Mitamura. “Kutsumi was absolutely faithful and submissive to Mitamura and attended to him like an old-fashioned, self-effacing wife. The contrast between her politics and her behavior is intriguing” (Hane 140). The contrast between the politics and behavior of most socialists was similarly “intriguing”. Mitamura, like many socialist men, unquestioningly perpetuated gender-structured oppression *despite* his consciousness of class-structured oppression.

The stories of Yuriko and Yoshiko, and Kutsumi show a pattern of patriarchy within the socialist movement of interwar Japan. While socialism addressed the failings of the capitalist economic system in Japan, it failed to address the economic issues of specific concern to women and of even greater concern to lesbian women in particular. In practice, the socialist movement often functioned as an active factor working against the material existence of lesbians in interwar Japan.

Unfortunately, such exclusion of one oppressed group by another is commonplace throughout history and still is in the modern liberation movement. The modern popular critique of capitalism is accused of widespread racism (Sivesind). Modern feminists are accused of attacking other feminists (hooks). The commonness of such phenomenon makes the consequences no less dire. For Japan in particular the “tidal wave of suicide in the 1950’s” may have been partially prevented had the tidal wave of lesbian suicide in the 1920s and 30s been sufficiently ad-

dressed by either socialism or the government (Pinguet 17). In modern Japan, the problem does not manifest itself in suicide so much as emigration. Lesbian women, or anyone else, who do not find a place for themselves in modern Japanese society are not faced with a singular means of escape in death; they may simply flee to another country (Kelsky).

For the liberation movement in general, the conclusions here are more far-reaching. The burden of any liberation movement is great; such movements must move beyond narrow binary definitions of oppressed and oppressor and develop more generally applicable understandings of oppression that can serve the needs of all people. If not, the liberation movement will forever be condemned to reproduce the very oppression it works against while simply shifting the lines of division.

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