

# Terrifying Toilets: Japanese Toilet Ghosts and Sexual Liberation in the Postwar Period

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Monsters are the physical representation of our unnamed and subconscious fears. As a result of this ambiguity they have the ability to rise and fall in and out of the public imagination as necessary. They provide humanity with an instrument, however grotesque, to voice its concerns with the time in which the monster appears. Not all of the ghosts and goblins provide obvious clues about their origins, in terms of the public psyche; two specters haunt public bathrooms for no apparent reason other than an arbitrary desire to reside there. The myths surrounding *Toire no Hanako-san* (lit. Hanako of the Toilet, or Hanako-san) and *Aka Manto* (Red Cloak) are varied and change from telling to telling, yet one aspect remains the same: using the facilities in Japan can be a truly terrifying experience.

In the majority of the stories circulating, it is only the girls' bathroom that has ghosts in the U-bend. In the case of Hanako-san, no one is certain as to how she came to be a permanent fixture in the washroom. It is believed she began her haunting in the 1950s, although she gained notoriety thirty years later when summoning her became a rite of passage for girls in elementary schools. Some say she is the ghost of a young girl who died in an air raid during World War II while using the facilities. Often described as having bobbed hair and wearing a red skirt, one must knock three times on the door of the third stall in the restroom on the third floor while asking, "Are you there, Hanako-san?" If a faint "Yes, I'm here" comes from behind the door, the person still has the option to leave without consequences other than being scared. Should she open the door, one of two things can happen: if Hanako is in a good mood, she will simply vanish. If, on the other hand, she is upset about something, the victim will be pulled into the toilet and die. The simplest and surest way to avoid crossing her path is to stay away from her designated hiding spot.

The other supernatural inhabitant of the washroom is much more violent than Hanako-san. Aka Manto is known to haunt the last stall and does not need

to be summoned to appear. He is said to wear a red cloak and a white mask to cover his face. While a girl sits on the toilet a male voice will ask, depending on the story, if she wants red or blue paper or to put on a red or blue cloak. If the answer is red, she will either be beheaded or any number of gruesome cuts will appear on her body, giving her the aforementioned 'red cloak.' Should her answer be blue, hands will appear to strangle her or the blood will drain from body, turning her a shade of blue. Asking for a different color will result in the floor opening up and two hands coming to drag the victim into the pits of hell. One must refuse whatever he offers in order to escape from him. His origins are less well-known; it is believed that in life he was so achingly beautiful that women fell in love with him just by looking at his face, prompting him to don the mask. One day he supposedly kidnapped a young woman and the two were never seen again until he began to plague the girls' washroom.

Ghost stories and urban legends such as Hanako-san and Aka Manto reflect the time period that created them, as well as the larger society from which they sprouted. Japan has a long history of equating females and menstruation with death and impurity, going as far back as the Japanese creation myth involving Izanagi and Izanami. After the two gods created the earth and married Izanami gave birth to several deities, including the fire god Kagutsuchi. She died from burns sustained during delivery and descended to Yomi, the dark Land of the Dead. Izanagi went after her to try to bring her back to life, and she agreed to return as long as he agreed not look at her until they were out of Yomi. He could not resist the urge and lit a piece of comb on fire so he could see her. Horrified by the ghastly creature death had turned her into, he ran away and blocked the entrance to Yomi with a boulder. This "contact with pollution meant that Izanagi had to participate in rites of purification... these rites, or *O-hara*, remain fundamental to Shinto" to this day (Balmain 63). Shinto and Buddhism, the two prevailing religions in Japan, both have had taboos placed on women during menstruation until as recently as the end of the nineteenth century (Segawa 239). These beliefs led to the creation of special huts that women were secluded to at night during their periods and prohibited them from touching the family cooking fires lest they pollute it and the whole family in the process. Special rites including the washing of hair and drinking tea from the local shrine or temple had to be observed before the woman was allowed back into her home. Originally it was believed that anything dealing with "the vagina involves impurity" and so any woman who had given birth would go to the Buddhist hell of blood for contaminating the earth, but during the Edo period this "idea of blood pollution was expanded to include menstrual bleeding, so it came to be believed that all women would go to the hell of blood after death" (Okano 20-21). These views have largely

been forgotten during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, yet they remain active in the Japanese subconscious even in modern times.

The presence of Hanako-san and Aka Manto in the bathroom can attest to the power of these subconscious leanings. Their stories are *kaidan*, or “narratives of the strange,” and can be classified as such since they “include elements of horror as well as a revenge motif” (Reider 80). The purpose they serve as *kaidan* is to inform and entertain the public imagination. Aka Manto keeps alive his odd quest for revenge against the sex that made him hide his face behind a mask while Hanako-san’s summoning is used as a test of courage for young schoolgirls, in line with the samurai tradition of telling scary stories to prove one’s bravery. The imagery connecting Aka Manto’s bloody option of ‘red’ with the historically negative reactions to menstruation strengthens the ties between blood, death, and the resulting impurity. *Kaidan* are frightening tales meant to terrify people, and in these particular cases, young girls. Their residency in the washroom is no coincidence if one considers the time period that gave rise to them.

While it is unclear as to when exactly Aka Manto came into being, Hanako-san’s story originates in the 1950s during the Allied occupation of Japan. It is during this time that a new sexual standard was becoming common practice amongst Japanese women as they adopted the Western ideals that were then in vogue, such as the “fashions that had been forbidden during the war” including “increased use of cosmetics and the wearing of such clothes as close-fitting blouses [and] skirts...emphasizing parts of the female anatomy—breasts and legs—that had been hidden by traditional clothing” (McLelland, *Queer Japan* 60). Among other changes that the loss of World War II brought about, these new practices led to an uncertain feeling as to the future of feminine morality in the presence of American forces stationed in Japan. The defeat served to emasculate Japanese men, and seeing ‘their women’ strolling arm-in-arm with American soldiers did nothing to soften the blow already dealt them. Given the devastation that most soldiers returned home to, it came as no surprise that a good number of young girls and women were left homeless and orphaned, desperate for any means of income to survive.

The solution many turned to was prostitution, specifically in service to the American servicemen. The need for sex industry workers was so high that the Japanese government set up the Recreation and Amusement Association (RAA) to act as a ‘female floodwall’ to handle the increase in demand (*ibid*, *Love, Sex, and Democracy* 56). The RAA managed the brothels that were put in place so the US forces would have an acceptable place to relieve sexual tension without resorting to rape. They also served to buffer the local ‘respectable’ women from becoming involved with the soldiers, thus keeping the Japanese

race 'pure' (Bix 538). Damages sustained during the war were immense for a large portion of the Japanese, and "for many young women, including some who were still in high school, there were no other options available" except prostitution (McLelland, *Love, Sex, and Democracy* 57). A new challenge appeared that the government had to face: preventing young women from falling victim to the new moral decay apparently taking over the country.

An aid to this quest came about in the form of urban legends and ghost stories, whether government officials knew it or not. It is possible that the two tales in question acted "as a means of reasserting social and ethical boundaries" (Balmain 52). In order for these stories to work as cautionary tales they have to take place in a space associated with one particular facet of femininity: the toilet. They accomplish this by evoking fear in one's bodily functions; one cannot help if she has to urinate, but the fear accompanied by possibly encountering Aka Manto or Hanako-san in the process restrains one from doing so, if only in public. The fact that the average commuting time in Japan is anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour makes it difficult for one to run home for a quick pee break, and so it is not easy to avoid the spooks in the toilets. This feeling is ultimately internalized as fear of the body itself with a focus on the genital area. Fear and pain are two powerful inhibitors and an admixture of the two (*fear of pain*, in relation to Aka Manto) is an even more potent combination. In a time when "public sexuality was suddenly visible and acceptable in a manner not seen prior to the war's end" and children of all ages were exposed to increasingly risqué images, some kind of inhibitor was necessary to prevent young girls from falling prey to the moral corruption beginning to surround them (McLelland, *Queer Japan* 62). Inducing apprehension towards their genitals would ideally keep girls from entering the sex trade, or at the very least make it an undesirable last resort. It is interesting to note, however, that when young boys would imitate the American soldiers in what is known as 'pan pan play' and stroll around the city streets with local girls on their arms, adults rarely admonished them (*ibid*, *Love, Sex, and Democracy* 73). Given the dichotomy of how women were, and to a certain extent still are, viewed in Japanese society, it is unsurprising that the government was willing to sacrifice some girls in order to protect others from the invading Western forces.

Japan, similar to most Western societies, has struggled with two basic images of women. Commonly referred to as the Madonna/whore complex, it states that women can be either paragons of purity and goodness or debased harlots who cater only to the sexual needs of the masses. In Japan the Madonna image is that of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion of mercy, often used to represent the maternal ideal. "The contradictory nature of the feminine as

both polluted and pure” creates tension in society and needs to be understood in terms harkening back to the creation myth with Izanami and Izanagi (Balmain 62). While Izanami is the mother of the world, many of the gods who inhabit it, and ultimately all of humankind, she is also responsible for death. After Izanagi escaped and blocked the entrance to Yomi he asked his wife for a divorce, prompting her to respond saying that she would kill a thousand people a day. Since Izanami represents all three points of the triangle, the association can be made between women, their life-giving capabilities through blood and menstruation, and death. Menstruation, which is primarily dealt with in the washroom, is thus something to be feared as it goes hand-in-hand with death. As such, there is little to wonder at that Hanako-san and Aka Manto are permanently linked to toilets and public bathrooms.

To most people the stories of *Toire no Hanako-san* and Aka Manto are exactly what they seem: amusing tales told to frighten young children. When they are viewed through the lens of the much larger context leading up to their arrival in the Japanese popular imagination one begins to see what role they play in that society. Whether the original intent behind their creation was to curtail young women from entering the sex industry or not, it is a duty the two perform with ease in the subconscious mind of many young Japanese.

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