

Mirror Images: The (Lack of) Parallels Between Nogami Yaeko and Her Female Protagonists

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Nogami Yaeko occupies a distinctive position in the pantheon of Japanese women writers. Many aspects of her career, personal life, and approach to writing differ from those of her contemporaries. As a result, readers stand to gain some unique insights from her works, but only following a careful examination of her history. Because many things in her life were unusual as compared to other Japanese women writers, it is difficult to analyze Nogami's work with the same lens one might use for her peers. Thus, this paper will begin with an overview of Nogami's life in order to provide readers a foundation on which to begin thinking about her works. Following this, several of her short stories will be analyzed in the context of her life story, as using this lens can reveal some key observations about her writing. Primarily, we will investigate the extent to which Nogami has written elements of her own life into her stories. In doing so, we may come to understand a technique that she used to provide some (subtle) commentary on social conditions.

One of the most remarkable things about Nogami is the length of her literary career, which extended through eight decades—beginning in 1907 and ending with her death in 1985 (“To Live” 147). Compared to many other writers, nothing about her career, or her life in general, was especially tumultuous. This at once sets her apart from her peers (such as Uno Chiyo with her multiple divorces or Tamura Toshiko with her financial struggles), and can be traced all the way back to her early life. Nogami was born in 1885 to a progressive family with parents who opted to send her to Tokyo for her secondary education, an unusual choice but an appropriate one given her extreme studiousness as a child. Her six years (1900-1906) in Tokyo at the Meiji School for Girls proved to be extremely influential, as the school operated under a philosophy of gender equality, something which was especially unusual for the time. Students were taught to “think freely, distrust conventions, and resist authority. [They] also received basic training in the appreciation of

Western literature, philosophy and aesthetics, which were taught by teachers who were themselves writers and critics” (“To Live” 148). This approach contrasts sharply to the more prevalent one, which based women’s education on the Confucian “good wife, wise mother” principle. Shortly after graduating in 1906, she married Nogami Toyochirō, a decision which proved to be critical in launching her literary career. Toyochirō did two important things for his wife. First, he introduced her to the writer Natsume Sōseki, who provided commentary on her early stories and familiarized her with the school of literary realism. This technique of writing about the ordinary details of everyday life was one Nogami used in many of her works. Second, he supported her in such a way that permitted her to both raise a family and pursue a productive literary career (“To Live” 149). Many women were forced to make a choice between the two, and the fact that Nogami did not have to was extremely influential to her writing.

This dual role as a “traditional woman” and a writer put Nogami in an odd position in terms of her relationships with other writers. As a wife and mother, she spent most of her time at home (“When Art” 385). Consequently, she did not closely interact with the rest of the literary world. Yukiko Tanaka argues that this “enabled her to see herself as neither a follower of the trend set by male writers nor as an imitator of a male model” (“Toward the New Era” 161). Nogami did not necessarily fit in with the women’s literary world either. While she supported feminist ideals, she did not participate heavily in feminist movements, nor did she exemplify the stereotypical woman “who flouted conventional behavior” (“When Art” 385). Such a female came to be classified in Japan as a “New Woman” by the early 1900s, and although many women supported this label, Nogami did not adopt it. This issue will become important as we begin analyzing some of her short stories. For now, it is important to remember that Nogami’s reluctance to associate herself with any particular literary group was intentional, as it allowed her to remain an “amateur” (“To Live” 149). We will see that her status as an amateur allowed her to engage in writing in a manner critical of society without being denounced by literary critics, who likely did not imagine that a mere “amateur” writer, and a woman at that, would dream of doing such a thing.

Although many of Nogami’s works were written in the style of literary realism, she explored other techniques as well. By the end of her career, she had written about such varied topics as social reform, political activism, and the nature of good and evil. This range of subject matter served as proof to the literary world, if there was not enough mounting evidence from other women writers, that “a woman could write fine fiction on a topic, and in a style, that is not particularly ‘feminine.’” By asking difficult moral questions, it also proved

that a woman is capable of dealing with abstract ideas, not just the narrowly confined experiences of everyday life” (“Toward the New Era” 164). Ever since Japan’s medieval period, the literary world contained a well-established category for works written by women. The assumption was that since women’s intellect differs dramatically from men’s, they could not contribute to literature in the same way as men and their work must be placed elsewhere in the literary canon. Specifically, women were only capable of writing “sentimental lyricism” and engaging in “impressionistic, non-intellectual, detailed observations of daily life” (Ericson 75). By the late 19th century, a growing number of women were publishing works that directly contradicted this assumption. Nogami’s contributions in this respect don’t necessarily set her apart, but Tanaka makes a further assertion about Nogami’s literary merit—that she was not a *keishu sakka*, a female who wrote tragic stories about the unfortunate realities of life as a woman (“Toward the New Era” 164). Tanaka cites Nogami’s self-proclaimed “amateur” approach to writing as evidence for this claim, in which she did not “approach fiction writing as a means of personal and social emancipation; instead, writing was an intellectual challenge for her” (“Toward the New Era” 165). In this light, Tanaka seems to be saying that Nogami’s works should not be considered revolutionary or subversive. If she merely used writing as a way to exercise her brain and not to express her opinions, it would not make sense to view her works as critical.

However, I do not necessarily agree that this interpretation is appropriate. Indeed, other scholars—primarily Eleanor Hogan—suggest that Nogami did actually use her writing as a platform on which to make sociopolitical statements. A careful reading of several of Nogami’s works suggests that she was engaging in some degree of commentary, albeit subtly. The way in which she does this is tricky to pinpoint, so the rest of this paper will focus on exploring that idea. The most fundamental issue here is whether or not Nogami wrote herself into her stories. If she had, her writing would be representative of her own life and might have provided her a way to assert criticisms. However, it is not clear the extent to which she did this. In fact, Hogan argues that it was precisely because she did *not* write herself into her stories that she could provide this commentary.

Let us begin by reviewing Hogan’s article on this issue, “When Art Does *Not* Represent Life: Nogami Yaeko and the Marriage Question.” To reiterate, Hogan feels that Nogami was somewhat isolated from the literary world due to the way in which she related to both the male and female writers of the time. Although she had a husband and male writer friend who solidly supported her literary endeavors, she was uncomfortable interacting with other male authors. Sōseki had group literary discussions at his house every week,

and while Nogami was always invited to attend, she declined to do so knowing that it would not be perceived as socially acceptable if she tried to speak (394). At the same time, she elected not to interact with fellow women writers either, specifically the contributors to *Seitō* (who called themselves New Women). The reason for this was her role as a wife and mother, which distanced her from the many other women writers who were divorced or involved with men out of wedlock (395). Furthermore, she was financially secure enough to be able to afford help with housework and child-care, providing her the freedom to write which was not afforded to women struggling to support themselves (395). Hogan concludes from this that her “status as a married woman allowed Nogami Yaeko herself, and her early works in particular, to be perceived as less radical than they actually were” (395). Knowing that she was a wife and mother tended to lead critics to interpret her works as supportive of the marriage system. The reality is more complex though, as the female protagonists in some of her works simultaneously operate within the bounds of the system and question it. Thus, it is only because Nogami appeared to fulfill the ideal of a traditional woman that she could get away with criticizing the system. Nonetheless, Hogan does not believe Nogami is really written into her own stories. The criticisms against marriage only appear in Nogami’s writing; she did not act them out in her own life. Therefore, her writing “did not represent her life, but allowed her to express her opinions in a thinly veiled manner” (396). Therefore, according to Hogan, Nogami was able to provide social commentary only by *not* writing herself into her characters.

Hogan bases this argument on an analysis of just two of Nogami’s works, “Meian” and *Machiko*. We will now look at her short story “Persimmon Sweets” in order to see if we can perform a similar analysis. “Persimmon Sweets” is, on the surface, a light-hearted story within a story. On one level, there is the story of the relationship between the female protagonist, Tokiko, and a family friend, Yoshida. Yoshida is something of an odd man, partially because he is unmarried and yet claims to have a wife. The second level of “Persimmon Sweets” involves Yoshida telling Tokiko and her sister-in-law the story of his marriage. It is this aspect of the story which deviates from the general light-hearted aura of the story—despite Yoshida’s rather flippant account of his experiences, the story is quite dark and decidedly bizarre. The gist of Yoshida’s story is this: one year on his annual pilgrimage to Mount Kokei, he stopped to visit an old family friend named Osetsu. He was disconcerted to find that she was living alone in a small house, despite her family’s luxurious mansion being located nearby. It turns out that Osetsu had been in an arranged marriage, but elected to leave and live on her own because she was so unhappy with it. She tried to cope with the marriage by pretending that her true self died, but

discovered it was impossible to live with this loss of self and decided to leave her husband. She and Yoshida part with the apocalyptic statement on her part that she will die the next time she marries. Ten days later, Yoshida received a package and a letter from Osetsu's father. The letter explains that Osetsu had wanted to marry him before she died, and the package contains Osetsu's cut-off chignon. Yoshida concludes his story with the rather bewildering statement, "Well, I imagine the identity of my wife has become clear now" (307).

Unfortunately, Yoshida's meaning still remains unclear to his listeners. We can derive meaning from the hair though, which is often used to symbolize beauty and femininity in Japan (*The Modern Murasaki* 298). By cutting off her hair, a woman could show that she was removing herself from the world by refusing to marry or by entering the religious life. As a result, "Osetsu's action illustrates that she is relinquishing her ties to the world and the marriage/family system, resulting in total 'self-annihilation'" (*The Modern Murasaki* 298). We see that Osetsu has symbolically died, as promised, and that Yoshida has actually just married her hair. For her part, Osetsu is living as a nun without the restraints of men or family life (*The Modern Murasaki* 298).

In the spirit of Hogan's article, we will now investigate the extent to which Nogami appears in the character of Osetsu. The link between the two women is somewhat tenuous, so it seems that Hogan's argument may be applicable to "Persimmon Sweets" as well. The main way in which the two women connect is through their reasons for marriage. Osetsu is forced into her marriage by family circumstances and views it as a form of self-sacrifice ("Persimmon Sweets" 306). Similarly, Nogami's marriage was not motivated by love, and was possibly even a deliberately calculated move on her part in order to avoid an arranged marriage and remain in Tokyo where she could continue writing ("When Art" 384). Despite the sacrifice of settling for a loveless union, Nogami's marriage turned out to be quite beneficial for her, as her husband was influential in furthering her literary career. This is where Nogami diverges from Osetsu, whose unsatisfactory marriage prompts dramatic action. Hence, there is evidence in support of Hogan's belief that Nogami's writing doesn't represent her life, but still allowed her to express opinions. And, in contrast to Tanaka's belief that writing was simply an intellectual challenge for Nogami, there is strong evidence that Nogami is, in fact, making a statement about the marriage system. Osetsu escapes from the rigid marriage system twice—once by leaving a bad marriage and once by becoming a nun. Because she is able to take control of her life in this way, despite the hardships, we see that Osetsu is an empowered woman (*The Modern Murasaki* 299) and that Nogami is refusing to accept the validity of the traditional marriage system.

If we look at one of Nogami's stories which is not about marriage,

we can still find evidence that elements of Nogami's life are integrated into that of the protagonist. "A Story of a Missing Leg" particularly lends itself to this analysis because it is told from the point of view of an unnamed woman writer—making it especially easy to connect her with Nogami. The story opens upon the writer receiving a letter from a poorly-educated rural woman with a niece who is missing an arm. The aunt, believing it would be a good idea for the girl to try to become a writer, wants advice from the writer on how her niece might go about achieving this. Despite her normal inclinations to ignore requests like these, the writer agrees to meet with the aunt purely out of curiosity regarding the abnormality of the situation. At the meeting, the aunt reveals her hope that her niece can find something that she truly likes to do in order to make a living, since her disability will preclude her from getting married. The writer responds somewhat cynically to this notion, knowing how difficult it is as an artist to support herself by doing what she loves. At the same time, she is impressed with the situation, because it is only a recent social development that a family would ever consider "training their niece to become a writer, just as they might think of apprenticing their son to some trade or sending their daughter to become a hair stylist" (156). Nonetheless, she discourages the aunt from the idea, given the riskiness of the business and the uncertainty regarding the niece's actual interest in or talent for writing. The aunt accepts this answer, but before she leaves, cannot resist revealing another motivating factor behind her visit: she had thought that the writer was missing a leg. Surely this "beautiful, tragic woman writer who walks with crutches" (158) would be able to provide appropriately encouraging advice to her niece! The women remain polite to each other as the writer reveals that all of her limbs are intact, but she is aware that "nothing could make up for the leg that wasn't missing" (158). The story concludes with the writer wondering whether the aunt was truly as disheartened as she appeared on her departure.

It remains to be investigated to what extent Nogami wrote herself into the protagonist of this story. The obvious connection between them is that they are both writers. If we extend the parallel further, then we must entertain the notion that Nogami was suggesting she was crippled in some way. This would not be surprising, as many women writers would describe themselves in unappealing terms in compliance with the stereotype that respectable women (wives and mothers) did not write (Copeland 8). In Nogami's case, suggesting that she might be crippled exemplifies the idea that "the writing woman was regarded somehow as less than woman" (Copeland 8). There is a twist though, since neither Nogami nor the woman writer in the story is actually crippled. This might be interpreted as Nogami arguing for the acceptability of a writing career for women. Although the woman in the story is perceived as crippled

by a stranger and is thus “permitted” to be a writer since marriage wouldn’t be an option, she turns out to be completely healthy and still succeeding as a writer. Similarly, readers might be inclined to think that Nogami is calling herself crippled, but she is in no way that “beautiful, tragic woman writer who walks with crutches.” The commentary is particularly relevant coming from Nogami, who successfully balanced a successful literary career with being a wife and raising children.

In conclusion, “Persimmon Sweets” and “A Story of a Missing Leg” support Hogan’s claim that Nogami was able to make societal criticisms through her writing by virtue of the fact that her protagonists did not mirror her own life. Her criticisms tend to be unobtrusive in manner, which is not a result of chance. By referring to herself as an amateur, Nogami primed literary critics to view her as one also (early in her career, at least). Her role as a wife and mother further perpetuated this appearance, since it was unusual for a woman to be able to fulfill such a traditionally feminine role and still be taken seriously as a writer. However, Nogami’s approach to writing is decidedly not that of an amateur. Besides creating an impressive body of work throughout her long career, Nogami proved herself able to carefully craft literature so as to question society in a way that was not obvious to literary critics. The technique she used to do this was to *not* write elements of her own life into the lives of her female protagonists. Although Nogami enjoyed a happy and fruitful marriage, Osetsu in “Persimmon Sweets” has to resort to drastic actions two times in order to extricate herself from the stifling marriage system. And while Nogami was successful as a wife, mother, and writer, the woman writer in “A Story of a Missing Leg” is mistaken as a cripple by a stranger and is thought to have become a writer only because her disability kept her from having a more suitably feminine role. The careful reader is able to pick up on these subtle societal criticisms, but if one truly thought these pieces were written by an amateur, it would be easy to believe Nogami is not actually making any commentary since her own life generally complied with what was acceptable for women. It might be appropriate to say that regardless of whatever critics mistakenly thought or what Nogami herself said, Nogami should not be considered an amateur—her ability to integrate unobtrusive criticisms into her writing undeniably marks her as a skilled author.

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