

Article

Normal or Abnormal? A Critical Interpretation of the Reproductive Ustopia in Murata Sayaka's Speculative Fiction *Satsujin Shussan*

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse a speculative fiction *Satsujin Shussan* (The Murderous Birth) (2014) by Murata Sayaka (b.1979), a contemporary Japanese woman writer who won the Akutagawa Prize. I argue that *The Murderous Birth* is a reality-inspired reproductive fiction depicting a technological ustopia in the near future. Murata inclines her readers to beware of the internalised normalcy of reproductive justice, gender and morality constructed by the power relations. Interestingly, she hardly clarifies concrete definitions of normal and abnormal in her works but she prefers to draw a “blurred boundary (*boyaketa kyōkaisen*)” and let the readers critically reflect on the borderlines and definitions of normalcy by themselves.

The article does not deny the correlation between the fictional story and the present situation of reproduction in Japan by enumerating the fact that breeding is being interfered with countermeasures by the Japanese government, nevertheless, it attempts to consider the practical meanings of *The Murderous Birth* from a less-touched perspective, therefore, it deviates from the phenomenon of “low fertility rate and ageing society (*shōshi kōreika*),” as a common association of this story. Rather, it analyses *The Murderous Birth* based on the studies of (female) dystopia and speculative fiction. Also, Foucault's reexplanations of bio-power are utilised to examine the reproductive order in the fictional world. The Foucauldian Power-Knowledge and Heterotopia further contribute to arguing that *The Murderous Birth* serves as a mirror reflecting our understanding. Moreover, Murata doubted and challenged the alleged normalcy as a result of intertwined power relations by

wielding her narrative strategies. Given her identity as a woman nurtured in a traditional Japanese family, I adopt Japanese cultural studies and explore *The Murderous Birth* from a feminist perspective. Since Murata did not explicitly identify herself as a feminist writer, I elevate the story in the conclusion to embody Murata's beliefs in humanism and love.

Introduction: A Speculative Fiction about Japan with Declining Birthrate

Satsujin Shussan (The Murderous Birth) (2014) is a collection of short stories authored by Murata Sayaka (b. 1979), a contemporary female writer from Japan. Murata's *Konbini Ningen* (Convenience Store Human Being) (2016) was awarded the 155th Akutagawa Prize. *The Murderous Birth* includes four short stories and the title of the collection derives from the story with the same name¹. Through her works, Murata explores the notion of "normalcy" and its associated standards and principles. While *Convenience Store Human Being* deals with this theme in depth, *The Murderous Birth* explores it even earlier. Murata's writing style does not provide concrete definitions of these concepts, but rather encourages readers to critically examine the boundaries between them. In *The Murderous Birth*, Murata envisions a future Japan where the government has implemented a "birth murder"² system, presumably, after less than one hundred years from now. This system allows the birth-givers who give birth ten times to legally exchange for the murder of one person. This futuristic premise provides a unique lens through which to explore the complexities of societal norms and their associated ethical implications.

The fictional story mainly revolves around four characters: Ikuko ("I"), Tamaki (Ikuko's adopted older sister), Misaki (Ikuko's adopted niece), and Sakiko (Ikuko's workmate). Tamaki and Misaki are both "*sentāko* (the centre kids)," who were adopted from the centre of the birth murder system, and they are staunch supporters of the system. In contrast, Sakiko was a rare opponent of the system and fought against it vigorously. She attempted to persuade the other main characters to reject their normalised abnormalities, but her efforts triggered Tamaki, who was an "*umihito* (people who give birth)" secretly bearing her tenth child at the beginning of the story. Tamaki's childhood story reveals her sociopathic tendencies, she thus randomly designated Sakiko as a "*shinibito* (people who die)," due to her dislike of Sakiko's efforts to reform the system.

The Murderous Birth is a speculative fiction about the future of Japan being a reproductive dystopia. Vint (74) argues that speculative fiction is "a way of extrapolating from specific technological capacities through to the changes in social relations that they might entail". In the other words, speculative fiction extrapolates from known science (Mohr 27), which distinguishes the very genre from pure fantasy or science fiction about as yet

unknown science. Thus, *The Murderous Birth* is often interpreted as a dystopian fiction which serves as speculative fiction, since the story fantasises about the future of Japan with achieved and achievable technological interventions. Furthermore, existing literary criticisms suggest that the future in *The Murderous Birth* is derived from the often-heard situation of *shōshi kōreika* (low fertility rate and ageing society) in present day of Japan. In particular, as for its achievements in literary circles in Japan, *The Murderous Birth* brought Murata the “Counter the Falling Birthrate Special Prize (*shōshika taisaku tokubetsu-shō*)” in the fourteenth Sense of Gender Awards in 2014. This interesting, unusual and unique title was “customised” for *The Murderous Birth* by the “Japanese Association for Gender Fantasy and Science Fiction,” since there are no other authors who have won this prize in the past. Although she does not reject the name of this prize nor argue against this interpretation of her work, Murata claims in her thoughts on winning this special prize that she was “very surprised (*odoroki mashita*)” by winning this prize with a “strange (*fushigi-na*)” name. Moreover, there have been discussions of the story which pointed out that *The Murderous Birth* reflects the situation of *shōshika*. For example, Kitamura Takashi suggests in a literary commentary that *The Murderous Birth* is a futuristic fiction centring on a countermeasure for the declining birthrate (*shōshika-taisaku*) (Kitamura 110).

The Japanese government's efforts to address the issue of declining birthrate in the country have been regularly reported by media. For instance, a personal proposal by Etō Senichi (b.1947), the chairperson of the Research Commission on Declining Birthrate Countermeasures (*shōshika taisaku chōsa-kai*) of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, suggested the exemptions of scholarship repayment on the condition of marriage and childbirth. To be specific, one-third of one's repayment may be exempted if s/he returns to his or her hometown in a less developed prefecture to get married, one-third may be reduced if one child is born, and a second child would lead to the exemption of another one-third of the parents' repayments (Jiji Press). The proposal sparked a heated debate among Japanese netizens on Twitter. Most of the netizens were displeased and even irritated by the governing party attempting to associate childbirth (as an individual's free intention) with money; some of them levelled accusations against the proposal, claiming that it effectively held childbirth as a hostage in order to secure exemption from scholarship repayment. Besides an unbalanced trend of Japanese people moving from suburban Japan to urban Japan to receive higher education, the proposal also hints at a relationship between educated Japanese nationals and their willingness to marry and give birth. Research (Kaneko 24; Shirahase 392; Ghaznavi et al.) indicates that the more they are educated in colleges, the less likely they are inclined to actively participate in reproduction. Declining birthrate and promoting fertility have become a subject for governmental interference in Japan. Therefore, *The Murderous Birth* does carry the potential to be seen as a

reference to contemporary Japan as a “super ageing society (*chō kōreika shakai*).” With the netizen’s satirical simile of scholarship repayment as a “hostage,” it appears appropriate to draw a parallel between the very top-down interference from the ruling party to the practices of the birth murder system depicted in *The Murderous Birth*.

However, the text indicates less relevance between the creepy reproductive order brought by the birth murder system and the tendency towards a low fertility rate in Japan. Although the ultimate goal of adopting this birth murder system is “to increase the fertility rate (Murata, “Satsujin” 14),” Murata also lays out that it is because a highly-progressive technology of birth control and contraception has detached the causal relationship between sex and giving birth (*ibid*). Women are often equipped with contraceptive devices for enjoying sex as an original pleasure and artificial insemination would be used if one wished to become pregnant. From this perspective, one of the messages that Murata attempts to convey through *The Murderous Birth* might involve a warning about the overuse of technology in the present generation and the even more developed future, which has been touched on and reflected in a different way by Margaret Atwood (b.1939), in her most important speculative fictions, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003). *The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts a fictional republic in which most human beings have lost fertility as a consequence of environmental pollution, including physical, chemical and biological factors that are always considered “inevitable costs” in order to achieve “more” economic and technological expansions, but the damage brought about by these long-term environmental invasions are subtle but accumulative in the reproductive system in human bodies. The technological factors are embedded more overtly in *Oryx and Crake*, in which genetic and pharmaceutical technologies do not achieve an ideal altruism but rather an anthropocentrism, which has caused an irreversible disaster to nature.

Accordingly, this article begins with a different and underexplored perspective of interpreting *The Murderous Birth* and its practical reflections. Section One analyses the birth murder system-centred world in *The Murderous Birth* employing a Foucauldian interpretation of bio-power. In order to analyse its genre and study Murata’s narrative strategies, (female) dystopian fiction from the other authors, as well as relevant works by Murata, will be compared horizontally in Section Two. Section Three and Four examine *The Murderous Birth* as a literary sphere of doubting and challenging by utilising Foucault’s research into Power-Knowledge and Heterotopia. Lastly, Section Five employs Japanese cultural studies to provide the text with a grounded understanding of its realistic implications from feminist and humanistic angles. I argue that *The Murderous Birth* is a reality-inspired speculative fiction depicting a technological dystopia in the near future; Murata inclines her readers to beware of the internalised normalcy of reproductive justice, gender and morality shaped by the power relations which lurk in these practices.

1 Bio-power

In the fictional state of Japan in *The Murderous Birth* where a birth murder system is adopted, to differentiate them from the natural birth givers and decedents, the breeders are called “*umihito*” and the designees for murder chosen by them are called “*shinibito*.” “Murder used to be wrong in a hundred years ago” (Murata, “Satsujin” 13), but when such a birth murder system has been normalised, murders through the system are no longer criminal and immoral. The ten children given by the *umihito* directly correspond to the national demand for population. Likewise, it is an honour for the *shinibito* since their sacrifices bring about the thriving of the nation, and death no longer seems pathetic to most individuals in this place. The polarised two statuses are both considered contributory in terms of improving the deficiency of the population in this country.

Murata's fictional future effectively exemplifies the application of Foucault's concept of bio-power, and this serves as the primary rationale for the use of Foucault's studies in this article. Foucault did not invent the concept of “bio-power” but he reposed and redefined the term in the late 1970s. In his early research, Foucault investigated the sovereign power placed above the individuals by the exercisers of power, who had the absolute and decisive right to *take life* or *let live* by their unilateral and even personal wills. In the case of the executions of the *shinibito*, being a lethal method sanctioned by the country, the purpose is not either a suppression of the inferiors or a consolidation towards the absolute power. Instead, they are regarded as an inevitable cost required by the aim of population growth. The executions were invented only because the hatred and murderous intent are common emotions that appear in all the stages of one's life, whether they are men or women. The legitimate murders that encourage and stimulate reproduction are a reward from the government to the individuals who actively dedicate themselves to constructing a productive nation. The deadly consequences undergone by the *shinibito*, however, are not the purpose of this ruthless birth murder system. The government-assured death does not correct any of the *shinibito*'s behaviour but influences and urges the *umihito* to give birth, and, thereby, it exerts the bio-power and controls the population to increase the fertility rate.

According to Foucault (“Security” 4-5), disciplinary power and bio-power examine different levels of social control, despite highly similar means of supervision, punishment and correction. Disciplinary power concerns the individual level, and it aims to subjugate *one*'s body and daily life practices. On the other hand, collective performances of the population interest bio-power. When the governance exerts bio-power by operating the birth murder system in *The Murderous Birth*, it is rarely found in a personal or individualised form. Instead, it seems to be numerical or statistical in the broad sense of population

control. For instance, a few passages emphasise the number of “ten” that each *umihito* should achieve in childbirth in order to murder one person legally, along with the number of stillbirths and failed inseminations excluded from the number of “ten.” Unlike Foucauldian bio-power exercised in the reality of contemporary nation-states, Murata’s dystopian society seems to consider insufficiently the measures and preventions towards what may be encountered in childbirth from a managerial perspective, compared to the quantity. Murata does not give any reasons to support this creepy and absurd priority of the government, but the industrialised reproductive system intensifies the scary and dystopian keynote of the story.

Foucault (“Society” 248) also suggests that “bio-power has no control over death, but it can control mortality.” Death is not directly decided and executed by the government in the story, but the birth murder system is wielded as a materialised bio-power to control mortality, and thus, eventually, to control the population. Besides the core principle of the birth murder system, which aims to control the ratio of birth and death, the story also states that the penalty of offence and consequence of suicide are manipulated by the system, two matters that also inevitably affect mortality regulation. Foucault also mentions the death penalty within biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and he suggests that the number of the death penalty has been sharply decreased for regulating, managing and fostering the population, rather than for “humanitarian” reasons (“The History” 138). In *The Murderous Birth*, capital punishment has been abolished. Murata depicts the abolition of capital punishment with black humour — “corrections” have substituted capital punishment for those who committed murders illegally without fulfilling the birth murder requirements. Accordingly, “*sankei* (the birth punishment)” was invented as a primary means to correct these criminals: the contraceptives will be removed mandatorily from the female, or, artificial uteruses will be installed mandatorily for the male, and they will have to give birth in the prison until the end of their lives. Mohr (28) declares that “satire is frequently a narrative element of dystopian literature.” Murata satirises the alleged “humanitarianism and rationality” of the tyrannical *sankei* in the story — a teacher said in the school that capital punishment is “irrational but emotional, ... and belonged to the barbaric past generation” (Murata, “Satsujin” 16). On the one hand, *sankei*, as an inhuman means of punishment, has been varnished and justified as a seemingly harmless measure. In fact, according to the main narrator, men die easily due to the implantation, while both men and women face the risk of death if the cycle of artificial birth-giving is repeated. Thus, *sankei* institutes an alternative form of capital punishment, which highlights the dystopian attribute of the story. On the other hand, according to Foucault (“The History” 138), bio-power serves “to ensure, sustain, and *multiply* [emphasis added] life, to put this life in order.” *Sankei* ensures the breeders capable of unlimited

procreation while mitigating the negative consequences accompanied population decline resulting from capital punishment. In short, functioning as a manifestation of bio-power, *sankei* enforces reproduction without any negative consequences on population growth, while simultaneously obscuring the “limit, scandal, and contradiction (ibid)” associated with the executions.

Besides, its typically dystopian attribute is embodied in suicide which dovetails with Foucault's interpretations of suicide under the control of sovereign power, despite only four sentences about suicide in the entire story. Three of these sentences suggest that suicide is, practically, an alternative for the *shinibito* who have to die but do not want to be executed by the *umihito*³. The remaining sentence conveys a message that the birth murder system prompts people to exercise greater caution in contemplating the act of relinquishing their lives. Each individual is confronted with the risk of facing sudden death at any given moment, suicide has thus been sharply reduced (Murata, “Satsujin” 66-67). Foucault interprets suicide as a transgression of the sovereignty's power in the past, it indeed was deemed as a crime against the absolute power that violates the sovereignty's supreme control of the masses.

Additionally, Foucault (“Society” 247) believes that death is disqualified while bio-power is being manifested. It is further argued by him that death is no longer a spectacular ceremony in public but it has become a “private and shameful taboo.” Interestingly, the *shinibito*'s death is highly ritualised, and thus ceremonial. A small part of the story specifies a *shinibito*'s funeral: it has become a custom to unify the outfits with white colour when attending the *shinibito*'s funerals, regardless of the fact that the widely-used colour of mourning (*mofuku*) is black in contemporary Japan. Interestingly, the white colour is now used frequently in auspicious events in Japan, such as in traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies (*shiomuku*, pure white kimono) and in the celebration colour combinations (*kōhaku*, red and white). It is revealed in the story that “the *shinibito* sacrifice for the rest of human beings; they are great people” (Murata, “Satsujin” 51). In contrast, the *shinibito*'s death exudes a sense of sacrificial, thereby glorious and sacred. As Foucault suggests about the ritualised death, “the power of the dying was transmitted to those who survived him” (“The History” 247-48). In *The Murderous Birth*, the power of the *shinibito* is transmitted to the rest by the prescriptive funerals, despite this not being by their own volition in most of the circumstances. It is commonly perceived by the nation in the story that the *shinibito* not only dies for the country's growth and prosperity, but also dies as a replacement for the rest of human beings. The *shinibito*, therefore, deserve an appreciative ceremony.

2 Dystopia

Although critics commonly note that *The Murderous Birth* possesses the conspicuous characteristics of a horrific dystopia, the story is unfolded primarily in Ikuko's neutral tone or in the optimistic tones of supporters of the system, and the mood only becomes pessimistic when Sakiko fights against the birth murder system. However, Specchio (98) claims in her discussion of *The Murderous Birth* that the technology-mediated birth system has constituted a female reproductive [e]utopia⁴ in the fiction. As she points out in the article, although *The Murderous Birth* often receives comments and responses categorising it as a horrific dystopia in the technological future, it actually depicts a utopian society where women and men are equal in giving birth. Giving birth is no longer gendered or even sexualised, and women, thus, are not bonded with responsible childbearing, "a mechanism of oppression." Specchio suggests that the elements like artificial wombs and insemination are commonly used in feminist utopian writings in the light of Dunja M. Mohr's studies of contemporary female dystopias. Specchio also mentions how Murata de-genders the salesclerks of the convenience stores in *Convenience Store Human Being*⁵, her well-known and widely-translated Akutagawa Prize-awarded fiction. Through gender neutralisation and technological interference, Murata seems intentionally and persistently to construct gender-equal worldviews in her literary domain, where the female bodies and identities are empowered in order that their biological functions and social status are not inferior to men anymore.

The audacious opinion by Specchio can be agreed with up to a point since Murata places some imperfections into the future of Japan where the reproductive technology is greatly developed, as if in order to stress the biological women's nature because it has been often read as inherently inferior in profuse real-life cases. Although reproductive technology has equalised both men's and women's ability to give birth and right to "birth-then-murder," Murata wrote at the beginning that Ikuko's previous male superior from her workplace, who had been implanted with an artificial uterus and attempted to give birth ten times, failed to survive the transplant rejection before meeting the condition of reproduction. Yet, giving ten births is not simple and harmless even for women, even though the fertility situation is supplemented considerably by developed medical science. Women are still more preponderant physiologically than men in terms of giving birth with inborn uteri. As Seaman (97) suggests, this fictional world is set in a feminine tone despite men's equal right to become the *umihito*. From this sense, Murata is creating a female reproductive utopia where women are not only dominant in reproduction, but in the fulfilment of a national expectation and achievement of revengeful conditions.

Besides, it is noted that the ten children by the *umihito* will all be sent to the

institution, “centre (*sentā*).” The “centre” was built next to a hospital where the *umihito* are taken care of during their pregnancies. If one wants a child, s/he could apply through the municipalities and adopt a “child from the centre (*sentākko*)”; and Ikuko's sister (Tamaki) and niece (Misaki) are family members who were both adopted from the centre, which suggests that the traditional Japanese family (*ie*) system that was mainly characterised by patriarchy (Davies and Ikeno 120) has been demolished. Davies and Ikeno (*ibid*) also emphasise the importance of the succession to the lineage in the *ie* system, but this nevertheless no longer exists in the fictional future of *The Murderous Birth* since families are allowed to consist of members who do not necessarily have a biological kinship. Fatherhood in the traditional patriarchal family structure is also absent in *The Murderous Birth*, but the protagonist's family is enabled by adoption and artificial insemination, which suggests the potential collapse of the monogamic order and compulsory heterosexuality in the traditional Japanese family structure.

It nonetheless remains debatable whether the fictional future in *The Murderous Birth* can be seen as a utopia, despite its opposition to our values, because its worldview does involve a series of undisguised elements of dystopia. For example, in order to equalise the unbalanced gender paradigm, Mohr (24) notes that one of the factors in female utopias is to emphasise women's education, including encouragement and reform. On the contrary, another body of knowledge may come with the establishment of a new order in dystopian fiction. In *The Murderous Birth*, the educational system has been altered to fit an era in which murders for the sake of birthrate have been justified. Only knowledge and values matching the domination of the birth murder system would be taught by teachers in the school. At the beginning of the story, Ikuko introduces how the educational system embraces the new meanings of murder, reproduction and morality and how these notions are imparted to the students by educators. Similarly, the system and legitimization of education had been significantly controlled when the new regime commenced governing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and women were prohibited to read and be educated, but instead, fertile women would be re-educated with the new dogma that domesticated them to be tame and “legged wombs” for families from the upper class. Controls over educational agencies are also embodied in the “Ministry of Truth (*Minitrue*)” in George Orwell's (1903-1950) *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), one of the most distinguished dystopian masterpieces in world literature. *Minitrue* takes control of the news press and publications, including educational books. It manufactures the truth, rewrites history and changes the facts to propagandise for the doctrine of the new regime. To sum up, given the frequency and necessity of systematic regulations over education, they shoulder a significant part when constructing a convincing and consolidated literary dystopia.

Atwood also points out in her critical nonfiction essay that the idea that “the brave

new order often comes about as the result of war and chaos” is a deep-rooted motif in literary and political utopian thinking (Atwood, “Dire” 83). Accordingly, utopia may occur as a dystopia if it is interpreted by different groups from certain perspectives and angles. A changeless and ultimate goal of establishing an idealistic utopia is observable in world-renowned dystopian fiction like the aforementioned *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963). However, it appears as though the ideal always fails when everyone’s demands and interests are claimed, and the intention to create a heaven, thus, eventually turns to building up a hell while unifying a new community. Clearly, this is usually recognised by the authority who initially planned to create a utopia, as Atwood writes in *The Handmaid’s Tale* that one of the male head architects of the new order acknowledged to his handmaid, “better never means better for everyone... it always means worse, for some” (Atwood, “The Handmaid’s” 211). Although the *shinibito* only constitute a minor number in the loss of the whole population and the birth murder system would stimulate the overall population growth, this fictional future of Japan is an unquestionable dystopia for them. “Utopia and dystopia contain a latent version of the other,” believed Atwood (“Dire” 66). She thus combined the word “utopia” and “dystopia” to invent the concept of “ustopia” in this essay which has attracted attention to this new concept in literature studies. Ustopia could be a more precise category if taking the dual natures of this fictional future in *The Murderous Birth* into account, as the feminist ideals (the equal duties in reproduction and going against the traditional family structures) and antifeminist factors (“industrialising” the reproduction) are performed in the story, simultaneously, which underscores the intertwined two-faced attributes of ustopia. The ustopian attribute of *The Murderous Birth* rationalises the polarised tones of Murata’s narrative strategy in this story – the absolute interests or harms to the whole do not exist except for certain groups of people.

3 Heterotopia

Section One elaborates on how an absurd reproductive system works in a reversed sphere and Section Two specifies the genre of the story. I will now further argue that *The Murderous Birth* is also a heterotopia established from the external terrain of literary space, which performs a reflective agency of reality. “Heterotopia” is a term first proposed by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966). Indeed, he mentioned the term only three times in his writings that have been published so far, which has left the definition of the term unstable and ambiguous. Literary studies often draw on his lecture to architects, *Of Other Spaces* (1986). Through this lecture, Foucault raises the mirror as a metaphorical example of heterotopia in reality. Heterotopia reflects sites with no real place (Foucault, “Of

Other” 24), which are the other world reflected by the mirror that appears parallel to reality but does not exist physically as the reality; thus, the mirror functions as a “placeless place” (ibid). The images inside and outside the mirror are interdependent but interactional - one infiltrates and premises the other. In accordance with the expectation of improving the population of Japan and existing technology used in reproduction, I argue that *The Murderous Birth* plays the role of a mirror that reflects the future of Japan with low birthrate, regardless of the developed technology. The reality and fictional world are significantly different but one always reflects on the other, and parallels can be found in each “world.” Readers not only foresee the possible future of a reproductive dystopia through *The Murderous Birth*, but also a critical recurrence of the present immersion in all-round technology and our perception of the normalcy.

Furthermore, David Der-wei Wang delivered a public lecture at Hong Kong University to discuss utopia, dystopia and heterotopia in the context of Chinese science fiction. He argued that fictional works could function as both the writers' and readers' agency to get involved in a self-aware heterotopia, which delimits the fantasy and reality, and also the normality and abnormality. From his doctoral thesis *Madness and Civilization* (1961) to the last book he published during his lifetime, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's lifelong research has been dedicated to exploring the constructions and categorizations of normality and abnormality under the prevailing discourses and power structures in different historical periods. He specifies that heterotopias of *deviation* in the physical sphere divide the alleged “normal” and “abnormal” places (Foucault, “Of Other” 24).

By relating Foucault's exploration of the constructions of normality and abnormality to Murata's intention to create a “blurred boundary” (*boyaketa kyōkaisen*), I believe that I have uncovered a parallel between their respective aims to challenge societal norms and encourage critical reflection. Rather than judging the spaces divided by heterotopia as a dichotomy, the concept should be read in a more interrogatory and subversive sense. The very delimitation suggests that countless and unnoticeable heterodox spaces exist in our seemingly ordinary lives. As Wang took science fiction as an example to highlight that the very existence of “utopia and dystopia” prompts more possible reflections and understandings of our world. The differentiations and definitions of normal and abnormal, thus, could often be challenged and questioned through an intermedium like imaginary literature.

Murata's ambiguity came from a drastic change of her mind and values as a woman in her childhood. In fact, she used to be overly bound by the alleged “feminine image” since she was a kid. Her mom expected Murata to learn the piano, wear neat and clean dresses and go to a traditional women's university; the “right man” then would fall in love with her at first sight and she could get married to him (Itakura, “Aliens”). She even

believed that women were supposed to be “extraordinarily clean, pure and cute in order to meet men’s desires (especially, in sex)” when she was a schoolgirl in junior school, because this was the way that women were treated by Japanese media at the time (Enami, “Murata”). When she entered high school, Yamada Eimi’s (b.1959) books changed her thoughts about sexuality and relations between men and women. Murata often shares her encounter with Yamada’s works in talks and interviews now to express her gratitude to Yamada, who not only inspired Murata to become a writer, but also changed Murata’s life and values thoroughly. Yamada’s works involve explicit depictions of sexual scenes led and dominated by female characters. Although some criticised those works harshly (like “*kimochi-warui* [gross]”) at the time, they released Murata from the stress due to over-caring about the femininity in men’s perspectives. Murata could finally follow *her* sexual desires and fall in love without worrying about “disqualification” as a decent woman.

4 Normalcy and Blurred Boundary

Before this section dwells on the normality and abnormality that are divided by the aforementioned Murata’s blurred boundary, I would like to speculate about the world before the reversal of them. The reversed normalcy in *The Murderous Birth* does not only imply that an absurd and cruel means has established a new order, but it also could be an outcome once people are accustomed to the new order, because a new order would not be established at once but the story reveals that importing the birth murder system into Japan did experience a tough period since there used to be strong opposition to murders. However, “it would look natural and timeless once the system is adopted” (Murata, “Satsujin” 14-15). Murata implies that the birth murder system’s arrival in the fictional future of Japan is undemocratic since the legitimation neglected the dissatisfaction of the masses. In fact, the anesthetisations that the *shinibito* will receive before their executions seem to be the only humane thing disclosed in this birth murder system. The dictatorial interferences of normalcy enrich the dystopian aura of the story.

Moreover, it could be presumed that the opposition group did not insist on their demands to reject this creepy and immoral system. Although it is needless to mention that their voice might be halted under the control of a less humane regime, I conjecture that the peer pressure (*dōchō atsuruyoku*) in Japan might be another factor behind the acceptance of the birth murder system since Murata has subtly alluded to this theme multiple times in her other works. Ōta (34-35) claims that the peer pressure of Japanese society is caused by its closed nature (*heisasei*) and homogeneity (*dōshitsusei*), simultaneously, which both derive from cultural, physical and historical attributes of Japan. Homogeneity urges individuals to parallel the behaviour of the self and others, and being closed off

ensures that this is acquired naturally within the community (71). Ōta (70) further suggests that the core of this peer pressure in Japan is the ideology of communitarianism, where the ideology does not only suggest the vertical power of obedience to order and authority but also a horizontal power that comes from the spontaneous behaviours of the masses (67-68). Even though Murata does not elaborate in any detail about how the opposition group accepted the birth murder system, one attempting to fit into the “normalcy” is a frequent plot in Murata’s works. For instance, Keiko, the protagonist in *Convenience Store Human Being* was seen as an oddity because she was single and meanwhile working in a convenience store even in her thirties. In order to meet the expectations of “normalcy” projected by people around her, she invited Shiraha, a single man who also worked in the convenience store, to pretend that she found a man to date and cohabit with. Furthermore, in *Chikyū-Seijin* (Earthlings) (2019), the female protagonist and her husband knew each other through a matchmaking website for those who wish to escape from the prevailing trend, like marriage. In order to fulfill the expectations of assimilation into the “factory of society,” they have to act like a conventional couple.

Though the main characters are described as misfits (even “weirdos”) in *Convenience Store Human Being* and *Earthlings* where the worlds correlate to our values, the two and the world in *The Murderous Birth* possess different standards of normalcy, which proves that the truth is variable and dependent on a power relation running through the fictional world. As I pointed out in Section Two, systematic changes in educational institutions are one of the indications of a new epoch, another horizontal comparison between the educational system in *The Murderous Birth* and the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could explain the alleged “truth of normalcy.” Decriminalised and normalised murders by teachers in the school of *The Murderous Birth* are hypocrisy and a fallacy from the readers’ point of view since our values about murders only remain in Ikuko and Sakiko’s memories before the introduction of the birth murder system, or when history is recalled in the future schools. Whereas the “Ministry of Truth” might be seen as a misnomer since it serves as the opposite of “truth” in our cognition, it however is apt and accurate since the very ministry is in charge of deciding what the truth is (Hendricks and Mehlsen 130). This particular mode of socially formed “truth” is also suggested by Schwan and Shapiro (47) when they analyse Foucault’s assertion about the intricate relationship between power and knowledge in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). It is noticeable that Foucault differentiates *savoir* and *connaissance* in French when he clarifies the “objectivity” of *knowledge*, whereas *savoir* denotes a *rule-based* knowledge produced by power (Foucault, “Discipline” 27). Truth and knowledge that formulates truth are generated by the power struggles in each field, discipline and institution, which consolidates the legitimacy of power. To be specific, in order to establish the truth of the superiority of the birth murder system in

The Murderous Birth, a new rule-based knowledge about morality and murder is indispensable. Struggle against this super-power (*surpouvoir*) was aroused by the masses who had opposed the new system before its legitimacy of truth was confirmed by the new knowledge. Knowledge is thus a managerial mechanism of the super-power to impose the truth on most of the individuals from the infra-power (*infra-pouvoir*).

Within the Foucauldian discourses of power relations, he also proposes “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, “The History” 95) in order to deny the suppression of power from top to down; rather, power flows in the complicated net of power relations in the form of resistance. Sakiko’s figure constitutes the power of resistance in *The Murderous Birth* since she was showering in the strange eyes of the majority who accepted the truth of the birth murder system through the new knowledge. Since power and resistance coexist to validate the power relation, I argue that Murata depicts a comprehensive picture of the power relations in *The Murderous Birth*. The resistance was borne by Sakiko before she died and we could tell that it has been implicitly transferred to Ikuko in the ending plot when Ikuko helped Tamaki to finish executing Sakiko and found out her hidden baby was also murdered in her body, Ikuko volunteered to become an *umihito* to pay for this innocent life. Besides, the resisting the power relations underscore the aforementioned dystopian aura of the story. There is never an interest for all but only for some, which vice versa curtails the ideal vision of a utopia.

5 Feminism and Humanism

As a woman writer who believes that she just writes naturally by following the unconsciousness in her heart where the female hardships lurk underneath (Hayashi, “Yamazaki”), Murata also expresses her feminist compassion for women suffering from this reproductive dystopia in *The Murderous Birth*. I noticed that her endeavour is embodied in the discreteness when choosing the languages for different characters in this story. Ikuko never uses “*sensei*” for teachers but she would say “*kyōshi*,” whereas the contrast occurs when only Ikuko’s niece, Misaki, would call the teachers “*sensei*” in the elementary school, which means that Murata differentiates them deliberately. In Japanese, “*sensei*” does not refer to teachers exclusively, but lawyers, doctors and politicians are often also called “*sensei*.” “*Sensei*” does not signify those careers but it is often used when addressing someone who can help and benefit people. Ikuko’s avoidance of addressing teachers as “*sensei*” suggestively alludes to her negative attitude towards the unreasonableness within the system. Further, it hints at Ikuko’s final decision as an individual with a conscience that matches our understanding of morality.

There are two times that Ikuko mentions “teachers” (as “*kyōshi*”) throughout the entire story. The first time has been mentioned in Section Two, when Ikuko recites how her *kyōshi* justified the normalised murder and praised the superiority of the birth murder system. Ikuko’s short introduction explicates the background of the fiction at the beginning, which forms a striking contrast between reality and fantasy. Ikuko leaves no complaint when she talks about how the standard of “normalcy” was different in her childhood, which allows Ikuko to wield her ambivalence towards these drastic social changes in the later plots.

In the middle of the story, Ikuko uses “*kyōshi*” again to refer to a male teacher from her high school, when she recalls that her initial hatred was generated which spawned her first intention to kill someone. In fact, she addresses the teacher by his last name “Fukui” most frequently, rather than “(that) *kyōshi*” or “Fukui *sensei*.” Ikuko reveals that it was rumoured that some female students had been sexually harassed by Fukui before, Fukui thus received a poor reputation among the students. Unfortunately, Ikuko had been targeted by Fukui but she concealed it in order to maintain her academic scores uninfluenced. However, Ikuko felt her agony was unbearable and she was about to commit suicide to halt the suffering. She did not commit suicide but the suicidal drive motivated her to stay revengeful and become an *umihito* to kill Fukui one day. Eventually, she did not accomplish killing Fukui but she graduated from high school uneventfully, as she and Fukui did not encounter one another again, and Ikuko no longer pursued her homicidal hatred of Fukui (Murata, “Satsujin” 62-64). Ikuko’s rejection of using a title to address teachers is a well-designed detail that implies a different but scornful attitude from Ikuko in earlier periods. Moreover, Murata insinuates that women’s mental suffering from sexual harassment might be restrained, especially in Japan where a strong stigma is attached to talking about sexual harassment and the victims had no choice but to endure in silence (French, “Fighting Sex”). Moreover, the very plot reflects that there might be cases of sexual harassment that never receive fair and reasonable solutions in the end but they ended up with nothing solid to punish the harassers and cure the victims’ wounds both mentally and physically, even though those victims might “forget” or “erase” the trauma by the changes of time and space.

In addition, Murata restates the issue of women being sexually harassed in *Earthlings*. The female protagonist, Natsuki, was sexually harassed a few times by a good-looking college student teaching in her cram school when she was in grade six. As her stress accumulated and nobody paid attention to her situation, Natsuki eventually killed the teacher while sinking into a trauma that even she was unconscious about. However, when Natsuki grew up and became brave enough to uncover this scar to her friends, one friend accused Natsuki of being narcissistic and pretentious to make up a story about a

handsome college student falling in love with a primary school girl. When Natsuki hid the harasser's identity but just told the story again to another friend, she assumed that Natsuki was harassed by an old man and did not associate it with the idea that Natsuki would be sexually assaulted by a good-looking young man at all (Murata, "Chikyū" 216-220). Murata epitomises the issues of sexual harassment by projecting them onto Natsuki and Ikuko's experiences. More importantly, she stresses the stigmatised silence and negligence triggered by the aftermath of sexual harassment. The female victims of sexual harassment are commonly found to endure in silence in Japanese culture, as Burns (51) points out that there is a cultural expectation to guide women to remain silent about their "private" difficulties or problems, especially with regard to the shame (*haji*), as the social value teaches women to "*gaman*," including endurance, will-power and self-control. Moreover, it still could be fruitless even if they are brave enough to break the silence and seek help from those surrounding them. Murata advises through her writings that uncountable unsolved cases of sexual violence do exist and the victims are marginalised either because the time and space have reduced the pain superficially, or because of the bystanders' carelessness and apathy.

Humanism is another aspect that is highlighted in this dystopian fiction. Although I observed that women are in an advantageous position in terms of surviving during childbirth, feminist humanism is embodied when Ikuko reveals Tamaki's unsound condition of health frequently. For instance, excess milk was formed and secreted after Tamaki gave birth each time, which pained her and brought the risk of miscarriage. Witnessing her sister's agony, "no matter how advanced the artificial womb is, this (milk) is one thing that men do not possess, a hardship that only women have to deal with," commented Ikuko (Murata, "Satsujin" 85-86). Further, Tamaki had to take treatment in the ICU frequently after she delivered the fifth child, as childbirth was not an ordinary burden even for women (97); on the execution day, Tamaki came by a wheelchair with an intravenous bottle on her due to the inability to eat by herself (107). Doubled effects are performed by Murata's narrative strategies when depicting Tamaki's weakness after giving birth ten times. It straightforwardly accuses the birth murder system of its inhuman treatment towards women's bodies, despite the reproductive technology that has been strengthened to a certain extent in a hundred years from now. Yet, it establishes a condition to legitimise Ikuko as a helper of Tamaki to complete the execution, for the reason that Tamaki could not carry out the murder alone right after her tenth child was born.

As mentioned briefly earlier, the ending plot is unexpected and cruel when Ikuko volunteered to become an *umihito* because she believed that the little life in Sakiko's body was innocent but murdered, and when she helped Tamaki to execute Sakiko. Ikuko insisted on utilising the birth murder system to exchange the life she killed by giving birth to

ten children, although everyone was unaware of Sakiko's pregnancy before the execution. Ikuko expressed some incongruities to accept the new reproductive system as if it is generated naturally, and she could not discard her "outdated" cognisance of normalcy simply. This neutral standing conveys her contradiction towards morality and the present "normalcy" and Ikuko's self-conflict is echoed by her name, as another detail in Japanese by Murata. Despite "Ikuko" being a common name for girls in Japan, "iku" means breeding (*seiiku/sodachi*) in Japanese, whereas "-ko" is a common suffix in female Japanese names but also means "child." Ikuko's name indicates her identity as a non-adopted child, which hints at a potential source of Ikuko's humanity and compassion towards Sakiko and Sakiko's unborn child. The unforeseen but reasonable ending reflects sympathy for the lives, love and those who dare to resist and doubt the established order of normalcy. The story is a tragedy, but hope and humanism nonetheless do gleam in the ending — Ikuko's choice does not suggest that she was assimilated into the normalised abnormality, it nevertheless is expiatory that whoever with conscience would do. Eventually, Ikuko became an *umihito* but she also forewent the hatred that she used to deem as the biggest motivation for becoming an *umihito*; instead, love, regret and empathy for Sakiko and her child drove Ikuko to do penance for the "mistaken murder" committed by this crazy world.

Conclusion

Murata Sayaka demonstrates her potentiality as a creative and talented writer as a woman from a traditional family in the patriarchal state of Japan. Power relations between society and women are revealed through her depiction of the fictional power relations in *The Murderous Birth*, Murata's fiction thus contains strong indications of feminist social criticism. Intriguingly, she refrains from explicitly labelling herself as a conscious feminist writer who will continuously explore the very motif in her works, yet she does not reject the feminist perspective in interpreting (Hayashi, "Yamazaki"). Instead, she believes that those female hardships hidden in her heart that drive her to write fiction are derived from the invisible power struggles between women and the patriarchal power that internalises the expectations of "femininity."

Murata nonetheless acknowledges in interviews that she could not speak a single foreign language, her fictional works are becoming more international in the recent five years, most prominently, *Convenience Store Human Being* has been translated into over thirty languages. Besides the honour brought by *Convenience Store Human Being* winning the top prize of pure literature in Japan, which gave her the first step to reach out to more audiences inside and outside of Japan, it also could not be separated from Ginny Tapley Takemori's endeavours in translating three books and a few short stories of Murata into English. The

English edition is key to enabling Murata's works to perform on a global stage and face more audiences. There are ample potentials for the broader readership to have diverse interpretations towards *The Murderous Birth* since it remains untranslated into English. For instance, it is important to note that this article does not exhaustively analyse all the symbols found within the narrative, such as the recurring cicadas and insect-shaped candies.

More significantly, although most of the works are written with the evident background of Japan, such as place names, character names and cultural customs, those stories remarkably resonate with international audiences. As McNeil (7) also finds out in the success of *Convenience Story Human Being* suggests that these themes about gender, bodies and reproduction clearly transcend the border of Japan. To elaborate through the lens of *The Murderous Birth*, the issue of "low fertility rate and ageing society" does not exclusively belong to Japan anymore, but is also applicable to countries like South Korea and China. In order to tackle the issue of insufficient population, it is also common that various countries are relying on reproductive technology to reduce infertility. When introducing these techniques into practice, human rights and ethical issues still occur in a variety of forms against different groups and individuals. Suchlike issues lurk under our everyday practices and invisibly construct the culture of society beyond the national borders. Murata wishes that her readers could feel emancipated from the pain and bitterness that come from these insensible and even internalised influences through reading her works, though she claims that she never intends to write fiction to deliberately rebel against how society is (Katsura, "Iwakan").

In addition, I noticed that the separation and interplay of "love and sex" are a common thread in her fiction about reproduction, including *The Murderous Birth*, *Shōmetsu-Sekai* (The Vanishing World) and *Seimeishiki* (Life Ceremony)⁶. Heterotopias of inversion in normalcy and ethics from these stories show the readers the fictional generations where reproduction involving love would be deemed strange or abnormal since it is no longer a prerequisite of breeding between the parents. Rather than the "sexlessness" which is often seen in media when describing contemporary Japan facing the issues of no marriage and no children, "lovelessness" is illustrated in these stories.

Iida (70) critiques that the institutionalised love and sexuality in Murata's work create a sense of extreme constraint and confinement. However, I believe that *The Murderous Birth* is a subtle story that explores the theme of love. Murata subverts the conventional understanding of breeding as a fruit of love in human history by presenting a birth murder system that materialises hatred into breeding. The ending culminates in a thought-provoking resolution that restores the positive implications of breeding to love. Murata's persistence in "love" can be traced back to the time when she struggled to fall in love (with men, particularly) in a natural manner as anticipated. To explain Murata's persistence in

“love,” one must delve into the time when she could not fall in love (with men, particularly) simply and “naturally” as anticipated. It was through Yamada Eimi's works that Murata realised the gender hegemony and incongruity between men and women, which further solidified her belief that her previous difficulty in forming relationships with men was not a natural result. Instead, she yearns for a free, respectful, and mutually comfortable form of love. As Sakiko from *The Murderous Birth*, revealed to her colleagues that once she wants to give birth, she would take [her contraceptive device] off, then have sex with whom she loves to get pregnant (Murata, “Satsujin” 68), her pregnant body signifies a crystal of love in a loveless reproductive desolation from the character's perspective. Harboring Sakiko's rebellious hope in this reproductive dystopia, her tragic ending corresponds Murata's longing for the true love. In summary, besides questioning the normalcy in a time when being “dead or alive” is bonded up with reproduction, Murata meanwhile asserts that love should never perish.

Endnotes

- 1 “*The Murderous Birth (Satsujin Shussan)*” denotes the short story hereinafter.
- 2 If we follow the order in Japanese, “*Satsujin Shussan*” should be translated as “murder birth.” However, for the sake of consistency, I will use the term “birth murder” in the subsequent discussion to reflect the sequence of this process.
- 3 “*Korosa reru no ga dōshitemo iyanara jisatsu o shite mo yoiga* (If you really don't like to be killed, you may kill yourself.)” (Murata, “Satsujin” 54).
 “*Tonikaku korosa reru no dake wa iyada, to jisatsu o suru hito mo iru* (Some people commit suicide because they don't want to be killed anyhow.)” (Murata, “Satsujin” 105).
 “*Korosa reru no ga iyanara, jisatsu mo eraberudeshou?* (If you don't want to be killed, killing yourself is an option, isn't it?)” (ibid).
 [My translations.]
- 4 According to Specchio (99), she uses “eutopia” rather than “utopia” in order to emphasise the positive acceptance, since Mohr (11) suggests that “utopia” “nowadays carries a pejorative connotation and is colloquially used to denigrate all sorts of seemingly ‘unrealistic,’ overtly idealistic, absurd or foolish proposals.” In order to underscore the dystopian essence in this section, I will hereafter use “utopia” to denote “eutopia” in this article.
- 5 The official English version of *Konbini Ningen* was translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori and the English book title is “Convenience Store Woman.” However, “*Ningen*” in Japanese means human beings which are not gender-signified by Murata's initial choice. Therefore, its Romanised Japanese title is preferred when this book is referred to in this paper.
- 6 I avoid categorising the three stories into “speculative fiction involving reproductive technology” because *Life Ceremony* should be categorised as a magical realistic fiction due to no evident technology and persecution being concerned, unlike in the former two stories.

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