

Reading Girls' Agency: The Pillow Book and Flower Tales, Past and Future

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Abstract

The topic of this paper emerged from a deceptively simple question: when and why did the linkage between girlhood and same-sex love emerge in Japanese culture? Ostensibly, the answer is clear. *Flower Tales* (*Hana Monogatari*) (1916–1924) was a serialized girls' magazine by the popular Japanese writer Yoshiya Nobuko; the novel featured flowers and romantic same-sex friendships coupled with Nobuko's depictions of a mutual crush. Dubbed as "S" (meaning sisterhood), such relationships captured the imagination of Japanese schoolgirls. Yoshiya claims, rather anachronistically, that it is often overlooked that the tradition of girlish sentiments that unfold in *Flower Tales* originates in *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon during the 10th century. In fact, at the time of her writing during the 1910s and 1920s, Sei Shonagon was reevaluated—or devaluated—as a "new woman" in literary circles, whereas Lady Murasaki was universally celebrated as a good female writer. This paper reconsiders the cultural work of *Flower Tales* by situating it across space and time. I argue that the linkage between flowers and lesbianism in *Flower Tales* emerged not simply as a reaction to patriarchal heterosexism or the new science of sexology but was informed by a female rereading of *The Pillow Book*. Thus, *Flower Tales* reshapes the past in a way that it reshapes the future. Moreover, I will discuss the crucial role that horticultural education and science education played in the lives of Japanese schoolgirls, to explore the function of flowers in *Flower Tales*.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Girlhood Studies, Japanese Literature

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Introduction

The topic of this essay emerged from a deceptively simple question: when and why did the linkage between girlhood and same-sex love emerge in Japanese culture, where a romantic female friendship or romance became associated with the “lily” flower? The answer to this question is clear; it was due to *Hana Monogatari* (Flower Tales) (1916–1924), a serialized girls’ novel by the Japanese popular writer Yoshiya Nobuko, which featured flowers and romantic same-sex friendships coupled with Nobuko’s depictions of a mutual crush. Dubbed as “S,” (meaning sisterhood), the relationships depicted in the novel captured schoolgirls’ imagination at the time¹ (Iwabuchi, Kan, Kume, & Hasegawa, 2015). Certainly, the association between flowers and female bonding, particularly lilies, continues to exert a profound influence on Japanese girls’ culture. The modern Japanese magazine *Comic Yuri Hime* (Comic Lily Princess), launched in 2005, carries stories of romance and sexual intimacy between girls.² Along these lines, Michiko Suzuki in her study, *Becoming Modern Women: Love and Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture* (2009), brilliantly discusses how the girls’ fiction genre, particularly *Flower Tales*, shaped the Japanese understanding of same-sex love. However, according to Yoshiya, what is often overlooked is that the tradition of girlish sentiments unfolding in *Flower Tales* originates in *Makura no Soshi* (*The Pillow Book*) written by Sei Shonagon in the 10th century. *The Pillow Book* is Japan’s oldest collection of essays and is a record of the life of Sei Shonagon with Empress Teishi and Sei Shonagon’s colleagues. In fact, during the time Yoshiya was writing, in the 1910s and 1920s, Sei Shonagon was reevaluated—or devaluated—as a “new woman” in literary circles, whereas Lady Murasaki, the author of *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) (1008) was universally celebrated as a good female writer, as discussed below.

This essay reconsiders the cultural work of *Flower Tales* by situating it across space and time. I argue that the linkage between flowers and lesbianism in *Flower Tales* emerged not simply as a reaction and resistance to patriarchal heterosexism, or the new science of sexology during the 1910s and 1920s,³ but was significantly informed

¹ Nobuko Yoshiya’s *Hana Monogatari* [Flower Tales] was widely regarded as the earliest successful girls’ novel and was intermittently serialized in the magazine *Shojo Gaho* (Girls’ Pictorial) from 1916 to 1924. Three installments of the series were also serialized in *Girls’ Club* (Shojo Club) from July 1925 to 1926. The stories were subsequently collected and published in book form in 1920. Recent girlhood studies in Japan position *Hana Monogatari* as a monumental epitome of girls’ novels, a genre marked by sentimentalism and flowery sentences. *Hana Monogatari* has 54 sections and the titles of these sections are flowers names (Lily of the Valley, Evening Primrose, Shirahagi, Wild Chrysanthemum, Sasanqua, Narcissus, Yellow Cherry Blossoms, Forget-Ne-Not Grass, Iris ...). The flower in the section title becomes the key item of the story in each section.

² *Comic Yuri Hime* (Comic Lily Princess) is a monthly magazine published by Ichijin-sha: <http://www.ichijinsha.co.jp/yurihime/>

³ Komashaku Kimi pointed out that *Hana Monogatari* entirely obliterated the couple fantasy derived from heterosexual love. Instead, it foregrounds a fraternal relationship between girls enabled by the modern girls’ school.

by a female rereading of *The Pillow Book* (Komashaku & Yoshiya, 1994). Thus, *Flower Tales* reshaped the past as it reshaped the future. Moreover, this essay will discuss the crucial role that horticultural education and science education played in the lives of Japanese schoolgirls to understand the function of flowers in *Flower Tales*.

Girls' Relationships and Flowers

Today, an intimate relationship between girls is called *Yuri* (lily). Interestingly, the term was first used in *Bara-Zoku* (Rose Tribe) (1971), a magazine that catered to male homosexuals in the 1970s, carrying the name of another flower—roses. Gay boys were associated with roses, and the magazine first used lilies to refer to its female readers. Eventually, “lily” became the codename for lesbians.

What ensued was the asymmetrical development of men and women in relation to flowers. During the 1970s, male homosexuality was symbolized by roses, but today, this association has lost its power. Gay boys and men gained new names such as *Yaoi*, *Homo*, and *BL*. However, lilies, originally coined in the gay magazine *Rose Tribe*, remain an icon for lesbian girls. However, the question is as to why does the link continue to capture girls' imagination?

I would suggest that it is because the cultural association between flowers and romantic friendships already existed in women's culture—a tradition that goes back to the publication of *Flower Tales*. The novel depicted beautiful and sentimental friendships between girls and created a contagious fever among schoolgirls. While Suzuki (2010, p. 36) points out that romantic friendship existed between girls in 19th-century Western literature, Yoshiya's narrative is more closely linked to 10th-century Japanese literature, namely *The Pillow Book*.

The Pillow Book is typically read as an *okashi* work, a Japanese term to mean charming, delightful, or amusing. In the history of Japanese literature, it is paired with an *aware* pathos that Lady Murasaki also depicted in *The Tale of Genji*. *Flower Tales* is a serialized novel featuring a romantic and sentimental relationship between girls depicting sisterhood, which is dubbed “S.” Thematically, and in terms of genre, it seems closer to *The Tale of Genji* than *The Pillow Book*, but *The Pillow Book* and *Flower Tales* share an important theme. Both the texts depict female-centered rather than heterosexual life, as I will discuss below.

The Pillow Book and Flower Tales

Although it is not acknowledged as often as it should be, *The Pillow Book* reads as a story of female bonding between the author and Empress Teishi whose beauty she admires. Empress Teishi and Sei Shonagon are both intelligent women. The reader often encounters descriptions of Sei Shonagon and Empress Teishi's mutual and high regard. As Komori (1998, p. 18) suggested, scenes where two women interact with each other and discuss their knowledge of Chinese classics, regarded as men's academic subject, illustrate Sei Shonagon's attempts to move beyond gender and social status frameworks. Two women of a different status cross two social barriers (gender and class) by playing with the Chinese classics.

Interestingly enough, Sei Shonagon as the author is obsessive about “tense” in the text. Empress Teishi died young, and after the loss of her beloved, Sei Shonagon was unhappy. In *The Pillow Book*, her happy days with Empress Teishi are vividly depicted, but they were in fact written after these days were forever lost. From the structure of *The Pillow Book*, Tsushima (2014) suggests that the author thoroughly eliminated unhappy signs at the time of her writing and did not write about the “present” without Teishi. Shonagon persistently returns to the past that was happy. Her forever lost “past” is thus expressed in the “present” tense. Tsushima calls it “attachment to the present” by which he means sticking to the “present” tense.

With striking similarity, *Flower Tales* also depicts relationships between girls as ephemeral and temporary. Their love is almost always drawn as “past.” During the Meiji era, having an “S” (sisterhood) relationship was becoming popular among school girls. “S” was different from the relationship between best friends because one of the couple had to be a senior. It is not clear how many girls actually had an “S” relationship in reality, but “S” certainly existed in girls’ novels. In *Flower Tales*, the fraternity between girls is depicted in every section. The main heroine adores an elder girl or woman whose appearance and dresses she admires. Love between girls never remains forever. It is a relationship that develops only during school days, and it has no future because love between girls never goes on forever. The mutual female gaze and admiration in *Flower Tales* overlaps with that in *The Pillow Book*. Both the works depict a female-centered life, often circumscribed by men and marriage.

***The Pillow Book* and “New Woman”**

As mentioned earlier, Sei Shonagon has been compared to Lady Murasaki, the author of *The Tale of Genji*, as both are pioneer female writers in Japanese literary history. However, during the Meiji era, Sei Shonagon alone was rediscovered or reinvented as a prototype of the “new woman,” namely feminists, who possess equal knowledge and the desired equal rights to men in society. The male evaluation of Sei Shonagon during the Meiji period was unfairly low because she reminded Japanese male scholars about modern “new women.” As Miyazaki (1998, pp. 1-16) observed, the Meiji era was an era of “suffering” for *The Pillow Book* and Sei Shonagon.

A case in point was the scholar Umezawa Waken who devoted one chapter of his book *Sei Shonagon and Lady Murasaki* (1912) to downplay Sei Shonagon. He defined Sei Shonagon as a precursor to “new women,” by which he meant women who wanted education, with a propensity to cultivate the new, without performing the old gender roles. Similarly, Fujioka (1977, pp. 68-82) evaluated Sei Shonagon as “arrogant” in his study *History of National Literature* and accused her of being an unwomanly woman.

What I would like to draw attention here, however, is that unlike *The Pillow Book*, *Flower Tales* was never read as a story associated with the “new woman” or as a threat to men during the Meiji era. I suggest that this threat was significantly displaced by the flower motif and by a sentimental ending that bids farewell to dear friends in each tale, all of which reach closure with the separation of the two girlfriends by death or misfortune.

Functions of Flowers

In *Flower Tales*, flowers function as devices to recall the loss of loved ones and the transitory nature of girlhood. For example, the section titled “Yellow Cherry Blossoms” reads as follows: “If spring comes, cherry blossoms will bloom beside the dormitory, but an adorable person will never show up under those cherry blossoms. No matter how many times spring comes, it is a vain desire to wish she appears under the tree” (Yoshiya, 2009, pp. 107-124). Here, the heroine overlaps the girl she adores with cherry blossoms and faces the fact that the former is forever lost to her. To the heroine, cherry blossoms serve as a medium to remember her lost girlfriend whose memory never dies but repeatedly blooms.

In this way, flowers are used to depict romantic friendships between girls that are always incomplete and lost. Flowers also stand in for a girlfriend whom the protagonist admires but cannot be with. Flowers symbolize the temporary nature of these relationships between girls. The transitional quality depicted in *Flower Tales* stands in marked contrast to marriage, which presupposes sexual union and procreation. Flowers as a motif foreclose such a possibility. School girls read flowers in that way, which was also made possible by the horticultural education at school at the time, as discussed below.

Flowers and Girls

To school girls during the Meiji era, flowers became increasingly important as Western horticultural culture was imported. Watanabe (2007, p. 158) observes that growing flowers came to be regarded as an act appropriate for girls during the Meiji period.

Educational materials on flowers also appeared in girls’ magazines. The fact that school girls had opportunities to make real contact with various flowers, both domestic and Western, played an important role in reading *Flower Tales* and identifying with the novel’s characters. A column of the same name helped to introduce flowers to readers of *Flower Tales*. From 1912 to 1913, the column was serialized every month while sometimes changing the title from “Flower Tales” to “Flower’s Languages (Hanakotoba).” The column introduced not only Japanese flowers but also foreign flowers. Even a cursory look at the *Shojo Gaho* (Girls Pictorial) magazine reveals photographs of gardening lessons in girls’ schools and the degree to which gardening culture took root in girlhood culture. It is in this context that Yoshiya’s *Flower Tales* became legible for school girls.

Yoshiya reconnected school girlhood with modernity and flowers by using Western flowers (the freesia, rose, daria, hyacinth, heliotrope, and sweet pea). Some chapters in *Flower Tales* deal with flowers imported from the west. Scenes of gardening lessons are drawn during the chapter on the sweet pea (Yoshiya, 2009, pp. 226-267). The chapter on the primula (Yoshiya, 2009, pp. 27-36) implicitly criticizes the act of plucking flowers or taking plants, and the chapter on the gentian (Yoshiya, 2009, pp. 151-169) depicts the power of flowers to regenerate even if stepped on. Readers surely learned that flowers should be regarded not as mere objects of beauty but as living beings to be cherished.

The threat of a new woman posed by *The Pillow Book* is displaced by representations of flowers and modern horticultural education. Thus, Yoshiya successfully co-opted the “new woman” into the framework of “girls.”

Conclusion

As I have discussed, flowers and romantic friendships between girls characterized girlhood culture during the Meiji era. It may have been a temporary fad at the time, but today, the name of the lily flower has transcended its impermanence and audaciously speaks of what was once previously unspeakable.

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