Mukoda Kuniko no Koibumi: A Posthumous Discovery

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Neither a novelist nor a poet, Kuniko Mukoda (1929-1981) for the most part has elided scholarly criticism, especially in the English language and the English-speaking world.[1] Albeit winning the eighty-third *Naoki Sho* in 1980, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Japan next to the *Akutagawa Sho*, she nevertheless remains most celebrated for her works as a scriptwriter for television. However, Mukoda's life was cut short when she died in a tragic airplane accident on 22 August, 1981. She left many things about her private life untold. *Mukoda Kuniko no Koibumi* (*The Love Letters of Kuniko Mukoda*), first published in 2002 by Mukoda's sister Kazuko, shed light on Mukoda's relationship with a married man thirteen years her senior. Referring to him only as "N-shi," the book reveals evidence of the affair which spanned over a decade.

I will first introduce examples from Mukoda's fictional works which were based on elements from real life. The comparisons will render apparent that Mukoda incorporated elements from her real life when writing fiction. This tendency will then be contrasted to voices from a contemporary critic and a family member who maintain that Mukoda revealed close to nothing about herself. Citing principally from the *Koibumi*, an attempt will be made to uncover the private side of Mukoda's life which she never disclosed to the public or to her family. This entails her affair with N-shi. I will then proceed to describe her amorous life, or rather, the lack thereof, after she ended her decade-long relationship. I argue in this paper that it was with due deference to her family, especially her parents, that Mukoda never acknowledged the extramarital affair with her clandestine partner.

[1] Although Mukoda's works have been included in collections such as Trevor Carolan's *The Colors of Heaven: Short Stories from the Pacific Rim* (1992), *The Name of the Flower: Stories by Kuniko Mukoda* (1994), translated by Tomone Matsumoto, remains the only edition readily available in English. Interestingly enough, some of Mukoda's stories have recently been translated into non-English languages, including the French *Menteur!* (Philippe Picquier, 2000). A Chinese edition of the *Love Letters* has also appeared (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2011). For the most part, Mukoda has only been mentioned in critical biographies. Sachiko Shibata Schierbeck's *Postwar Japanese Women Writers: An Up-to-date Bibliography with Biographical Sketches* (1989) allots only a few pages to each writer, and Chieko Mulhern's *Japanese Women Writers: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (1994) attempts to cover authors from the ninth century to the postwar era. Of the latter, Kohl 1997, 143 remarks that it is "a good place to start" for beginners in Japanese studies, but the ambitiously wide chronological coverage does not allow for in-depth analysis of each writer. Fowler 1992, 31 has stated his surprise at the mention of Mukoda's name, as one of "popular writers rarely heard of in academic circles," at a 1988 press conference hosted by the Japan Foundation in Tokyo. Although some publishers which Fowler mentions have since closed, such as Kodansha International (in 2011, much of its operations being taken across the continent to Kodansha USA, Inc.), his article is a valuable source on the history of English translations of Japanese works in the postwar era and the commercial issues involved in their publications.

It is not uncommon to find objects, images, or experiences of an author reflected in her works. In her essay "Satsumaage," Mukoda describes a pair of green high heels which was on display behind the front window of an old shoe store in Kagoshima. The delicate form of the shoes, with green ankle straps, led the young Mukoda, then only a child of about ten years, to assume that they must have been imported from abroad. In the years before World War II, no female member in her family was a "modern woman" ("modan na onna") who would wear high heels, and she writes that upon returning home that day she practiced walking on her toes, imagining that she was wearing a pair of heeled shoes.[2] The green heels which attracted Mukoda as a child must have remained somewhere in her mind well into adulthood. Decades later in her 1983 *A, Un*, the character Toyoko Mitamura enters the scene wearing a pair of "modern" green heels ("midoriiro no modan na hai hiiru").[3] In addition, Toyoko is described as being wrapped in a fox fur scarf, sporting a stylish haircut, and wearing bright red lipstick. In the plot, she is a young woman who is impregnated by the protagonist, a middle-aged and married factory owner, Shuzo Kadokura. Like the imported heels which she first saw in pre-War Kagoshima, for Mukoda, the character Toyoko is representative of a chic, "modern" woman who has a special and youthful allure.

Similarly, in the 1979 *Ashura no Gotoku*, there is a scene in which the Takezawa family orders sushi. At the table are the mother Fuji, the four Takezawa daughters Tsunako, Makiko, Takiko, and Sakiko, and Makiko's husband Takao Satomi. Takiko points out that Fuji is devouring more than her share of conger eel ("anago") and eggs, that she is eating those of others.[4] The author's family also had four children, though they were three daughters and one son. Mukoda's sister Kazuko has recently commented on the novelized version of the work, in which she mentions that the scene of the mother stealing conger eel and eggs of others when eating sushi is reminiscent of her own family, as it is exactly what their mother Sei used to do.[5]

Albeit clearly drawn from the author's experience, especially the latter regarding the predilections of her mother, Mukoda in fact barely reveals anything about herself. The Japanese nonfiction writer Kotaro Sawaki has commented that while Mukoda colorfully describes her father and mother, siblings, cats, and friends across many of her essays and offers glimpses of her family life in her fictional works, she rarely incorporates anecdotes about herself, particularly her experiences after reaching

[2] Mukoda 2012, 266.
[3] Ibid. 2009, 35.
[4] Ibid. 2011, 61.
[5] Ibid. 2002, 172.

young adulthood.[6] Kazuko commented much the same thing. Even regarding the essays which Mukoda drafted later in life, Kazuko expresses her impression that her sister did not expose herself completely. In her family, too, Mukoda seldom spoke about herself, Kazuko writes, and she believes that it is not attributable to the nine-year age difference between the siblings.[7] Thus Mukoda had a tendency to disclose, not only nothing about her love affair but also, close to nothing about her own person and her own experience.

However, Mukoda did incorporate objects and habits of others from real life. Furthermore, Yasunari Kawabata once stated of Japanese women writers: "[they] inevitably reveal their true selves. Even though she may not notice it herself, she is bared naked by her work."[8] It is not uncommon that an author, regardless of gender, bases his or her fiction on a true, personal experience. The plot and characters may have been altered enough for the work to be called fiction, but the depth of character development and setting, especially when placed alongside the author's biographical data, may uncover the fact that the author has in-depth knowledge of the subject matter about which she writes. Such, I argue, is the case with Mukoda and many of her works, including *Ashura no Gotoku* and *A, Un*, in which extramarital affairs are a major theme.[9]

Mukoda was an exceptional woman of her time in that she expressed a desire to receive higher education. After graduating from Jissen Women's College in 1950, she is said to have asked her parents if she could pursue another degree at a different university yet was unable to obtain their permission. She subsequently found employment on her own as a secretary at a company that made educational films. Though a small company, the employees ranged from translators, cameramen, to artists. It is there that she seems to have met N-shi.[10] Kazuko can recall only one instance on a Sunday afternoon in which Mukoda stopped by at her house with N-shi. She describes his physical appearance to have been about the same height as Mukoda, stout, and kind-looking. He may have spoken a few words with her mother, Kazuko is not sure, he then exchanged nods with her father from a distance, and the two

[6] Sawaki 2012, 297.
[7] Mukoda 2002, 155 and 2010, 58.
[8] Copeland 2006, 7 and 52; translation was done by Kathryn Pierce and Mika Endo. The original may be found in Kawabata (1982).
[9] Cf. Allinson's depiction of Mukoda's female characters: "Her women are often outspoken, assertive, and venturesome. They expect the worse and often experience it. But they seem more resilient and less self-destructive than the men and better able to adapt" (1999, 198). Likewise, Hara observes: "Mukoda's modern Japanese women are bound by cultural prescriptives… [yet they] usually anticipate all consequences as well" (1994, 252).
[10] Mukoda 2010, 71-72.

departed. Nobody seemed to notice or take heed of who N-shi was to Mukoda, and Mukoda never brought up his name or volunteered information about him to her family.[11]

Mukoda's correspondence with N-shi was found only posthumously. In the aftermaths of the fatal accident, her family sorted through Mukoda's possessions in her apartment. It was Michiko, the middle sister between the author Kuniko and Kazuko, who found a brown envelope which contained five letters by N-shi addressed to Mukoda, three letters from Mukoda to N-shi, N-shi's diary, one telegram, and two of N-shi's pocket schedule books.[12] Michiko, though she never questioned Mukoda, seemed to have been aware of the affair and sensed immediately that the contents of the envelope may be connected to N-shi. Without examining the details of each page, she entrusted the envelope and all of its contents to Kazuko. It was only later that Kazuko learned that the envelope had been given to Mukoda by N-shi's mother after his death in 1964.[13] Kazuko did not feel prepared to uncover the private life of her oldest sister until the spring of 2001, almost two decades after Mukoda's tragic death.

N-shi was a married man with children. Kazuko heard later that the couple was already separated when Mukoda began seeing the man.[14] Though his occupation was a photographer for documentary films, he seems to have suffered from an illness which incapacitated him from working. He lived alone, in a separate quarter, on the same family plot where his mother also lived.[15] The remaining correspondence between Mukoda and N-shi is from 1963. N-shi's diary entries are between October 1963 and February 1964. Assuming that the two met in the early 1950s, their relationship must have continued for over a decade.

In the letters to her lover, Mukoda shows a side of herself which she never revealed to her family. At home, she was a dependable eldest child who contributed large portions of her income to the family, took care to sew uniforms for her younger siblings, and was even a confidante to her mother.[16] However, in her correspondence, Mukoda calls her lover by the affectionate, and even childish, nickname "Babu."[17] N-shi also records in his diary and letters that Mukoda often prepared stew and other

[11] Ibid., 73.
[12] Ibid., 57 and 86.
[13] Ibid., 96.
[14] Ibid., 73 and 84.
[15] Ibid., 33 and 93-94..
[16] See, among others, ibid., 76-77 and 82.
[17] Ibid., 8 and 13.

meals for him, which they shared together or which she left for him for the next day.[18] The dates in the correspondence and diary entries suggest that no three days passed without them seeing one another.

However, even though she continued the relationship, she remained cautious about leaving any evidence of the affair to her family. Her efforts to keep the presence of her lover a secret are apparent in at least two points. Mukoda had always lived under the same roof as her family. It had become customary for Mukoda to stay at hotels to write in peace in order to meet deadlines. The letters which she addressed to N-shi were often written on hotel stationery. This suggests that she did not deem it a sagacious decision to write to her lover in the presence of her family at home. Furthermore, N-shi, when sending letters to Mukoda, often used the address of the hotel where she was staying. It may be presumed that Mukoda, and perhaps N-shi as well, did not wish that letters from her lover arrive at her residence, where they may incite unwanted attention from her family.[19]

Mukoda was also careful about the time of day in which she visited N-shi and always made sure that she returned home every day, albeit often towards midnight. Kazuko remembers that, although her sister also worked from home and it was not infrequent that she composed scripts from night until dawn, Mukoda usually left the house at three or four o'clock in the afternoon and returned at around eleven o'clock. She also remarks that Mukoda was seldom present for dinner.[20] This recollection corresponds to the time which N-shi noted in his diary of Mukoda's visits. In his entries N-shi recorded at what time he rose in the morning, his daily walks to Koenji in Tokyo, the items and prices of what he purchased that day, details of his meals, and at what time Mukoda arrived and departed. For example, on 28 November 1963, he noted that Mukoda visited him at four o'clock in the afternoon and left at half past ten, adding a comment that she showed signs of fatigue. The last record remains from 17 February 1964, possibly the last time Mukoda saw N-shi. That day too, the two had dinner together at his home and she left at half past ten at night.[21] These serve as testimonies to the heed which Mukoda took to keep her relationship - an illicit affair - a secret from her family.

The affair came to an abrupt end when N-shi committed suicide on 19 February 1964,

[18] See, among possible others, ibid., 15, 28, 31, 37, and 39.
[19] See ibid., 8-39.
[20] Ibid., 89.
[21] Ibid., 11 and 44. See also ibid., 22-43 for other entries between 8 December 1963 and 16 February 1964 in which N-shi indicates visits from Mukoda at similar times.

perhaps due to the forlorn state which he found himself in as a disabled person with scarce hope for recovery. N-shi would have been about forty-seven years old, and Mukoda, thirty-four. About this, too, Mukoda remained silent and expressed no grief in front of her family. In October of that year, just short of her thirty-fifth birthday, she left the household and moved to an apartment in central Tokyo. Her apartment also became her worksite where she wrote, held meetings with publishers, and frequently invited friends. She was famous and successful. However, notwithstanding her fondness for drinking, the large circle of acquaintances and friends, and the newly acquired independence of an apartment of her own, there were no rumors of romance about Mukoda. Mukoda never married.[22]

While the writer was still in her twenties, there was a period in which her mother was feverishly intent on matchmaking (*omiai*) for her eldest daughter. Perhaps already in a relationship with N-shi, Mukoda, though she succumbed to her mother's insistence and met several candidates, never married and waited until her mother eventually renounced the idea.[23] All in all, it may seem that, for Mukoda, her career remained a priority throughout her life. However, although she may never have been interested enough in marriage, she did not conceal her desire to be married. In her 1978 essay "Adazakura," Mukoda describes her paternal grandmother who never married yet bore two sons by two different men. In comparing herself to her grandmother, she wonders whether it is fortunate or not for her that she remains unable to leave such accomplishments ("jisseki") as her grandmother did.[24] In "Chiiko to Gurande," another essay published the same year, Mukoda calls herself an "old miss" and remembers a Christmas one year in which she sat at home alone with a small cake and beer. In her drunken state, she laughed out, "Merry Christmas!," only to notice a moment later tears welling up in her eyes.[25]

In middle age, Mukoda also developed a habit of jokingly wondering aloud to her friends if any widowed gentleman would take her as a second wife. The critic Yoko Kirishima remembers inviting some female friends, including Mukoda, for dinner in the early 1980s. The critic writes that there as well Mukoda was musing if anyone might be looking for a second wife. Kirishima had heard from others that it was by then Mukoda's habitual phrase, and she adds that she felt a poignant sincerity in her friend's words.[26] Another friend and writer, Hitomi Yamaguchi, recalls a similar

[22] For possible reasons, Allinson 1999, 197 suggests: "Both the need to care for her father until 1964 and a bout with cancer ensured her life as a single woman."
[23] Mukoda 2010, 72.
[24] Ibid. 2012, 116-18.
[25] Ibid. 2009, 142.
[26] Kirishima 2011, 194.

instance. In the aftermaths of winning the Naoki Prize, Mukoda was confounded by the media attention, camera flashes, and even blackmail recorded on her telephone. Yamaguchi in a conversation with her made a sympathetic comment that it must be hard during times like that to not have a *tsureai* (partner or spouse), to which Mukoda uttered the by then customary phrase: "I wonder if someone wouldn't take me as a second wife."[27]

Mukoda was fifty-one years old when she passed away. The question remains whether, had she lived to an elderly age, she would have written about her affair in an essay collection or decided to publish an autobiography. After all, Chiyo Uno did so very late in her life in 1983 in *Ikiteyuku Watashi*.[28] In Mukoda's case, it is unlikely that she would have published a confessional work detailing her private life. While Mukoda's father passed away due to a sudden heart failure in 1969, her mother outlived her. Sei lived to the age of one hundred and passed away in 2008. Mukoda would not have chosen to shock her elderly parent or potentially bring public disgrace to her family.

In the *Koibumi* from 2002, Kazuko tells an account of a conversation she held with Michiko after Mukoda's death. Kazuko offers her view that Mukoda did not elope because of her family and the possibly devastating impact that an elopement may give them. Michiko expresses assent, saying that their mother is most likely still unaware that such a man existed in her daughter's life. Mukoda must have known, Michiko muses, that their parents would not express approval and must have reached the conclusion that she better keep it a secret from her family.[29] In the *Koibumi*, Kazuko also mentions that in the 1950s, when Mukoda was in her mid-twenties, tension arose in the Mukoda household as there was suspicion in the family that their father may have been involved in an extramarital affair.[30] Even if N-shi was separated from his wife, Mukoda must have overlapped her mother's pain with that which she, as the lover, may be inflicting on N-shi's wife.[31]

The fact that Mukoda held onto the N-shi's notebooks and the correspondence with him is testament to the significance of the relationship to her. Mukoda's sisters agree that N-shi was a partner whom Mukoda could rely on and learn from as a writer and,

[27] Yamaguchi 2011, 91-92; translation is mine.
[28] For details about this work and the author Chiyo Uno, see Copeland (1992).
[29] Mukoda 2010, 84-85. Cf. Mulhern 1994, 246 who states that Mukoda had a "domineering father."
[30] Mukoda 2010, 74. For the social and legal aspects of adultery in Japan, which was a crime until 1947, see Suzuki 2013, 330-31.
[31] Cf. Mukoda 2010, 84.

more importantly, as a woman.[32] Remakes of Mukoda's television series continue to appear in the twenty-first century.[33] Decades following her death, the posthumous discovery adds another dimension to Mukoda's legacy.

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[32] Ibid., 85.

[33] While not an exhaustive list, I mention here several examples. A television remake of *Fuyu no Undoukai* (1977) was aired in 2005. *A, Un* (1980) was made into a film in 1989, and a remake appeared once again on television in 2000. *Ashura no Gotoku* (1979-1980) was novelized and its 2003 film adaptation, directed by Yoshimitsu Morita, premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival; see Qualls and Chin 2004. The work was also rewritten into a play in 2004. *Dakatsu no Gotoku*, another television series from 1981, was also made into a play in 2004 and a television remake was aired in 2012.

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