

The “Woman Problem”:¹ The Deconstruction of Gender Roles and the Construction of the
Japanese ‘New Woman’ by the *Seito* Society, 1911-1916

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¹ Dina M. Lowy, “The Japanese ‘New Woman’: Contending Images of Gender and Modernity, 1910-1920,” PhD. Diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2000, 1.

Yosano Akiko was born already a disappointment – she was supposed to be a boy. Her parents needed a son to inherit the family business, a sweet shop, and until her younger brother was born, she was exiled from her family.² Akiko grew up in the Meiji era of Japan (1868-1912), a time characterized by a governmental push for an increase in schooling available to well-off girls, which Akiko took advantage of – she graduated from the eighth grade before taking her position behind the counter of the family sweet shop.³ However, Akiko also experienced firsthand the restrictions that the Japanese government placed upon women in an attempt to institutionalize the patriarchal family unit.⁴ She wanted to be a writer, but had to work for her family, so she began to secretly write poetry, sending it to local literary magazines for publication.⁵ Akiko also wanted to marry for “romantic love,” a concept with little value to many Japanese households compared to the need to continue the family line – so in her teens, she ran away from home to be with the man she loved.⁶ Like Akiko, newly educated women of the Meiji era were dissatisfied with their place in society, and they began to look for ways to use their education to challenge societal norms regarding gender and sexual hierarchies in Japan. For example, one of the earliest modern women writers in Japan, Ichiyo Higuchi, published stories

² Laurel Rasplica Rodd, “Yosano Akiko and the Taisho Debate of the “New Woman,” *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945*, edited by Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1991), 179.

³ Jan Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan: New Woman Essays and Fiction from Seito, 1911-16* (Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2007), 11; Rodd, 179. Lowy provides a brief history of the end of the Meiji period, and demonstrates the types of policies the government instituted to the end of creating a modernized Japan worthy of international recognition. Under this institutionalized patriarchal system, the goal of women’s education was to train women to achieve the “good wife, wise mother” ideal. Lowy, 3, 5-8.

⁴ Rodd, 179; Lowy, 1; Rui Kohiyama, “New Women before the ‘New Woman’: Sasaki Toyoku and Sasaki Nobuko in Meiji Japan,” *Christianity and the Modern Woman in East Asia*, edited by Garrett L. Washington (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2018), 85.

⁵ Rodd, 179; In 1901, Akiko published her first book, *Midaregami* (Tangled hair), a volume of poetry that focused on “art, love, youth, spring, and, above all, the individual,” the beginning of a strong female voice in modern poetry. Janine Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird: Yosano Akiko and the Birth of the Female Voice in Modern Japanese Poetry* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2002), 1.

⁶ Akiko ran away to be with the still married founder of the New Poet Society, Yosano Takken. Eventually, they married and had 13 children, 11 of whom survived to adulthood. Rodd, 179; Kohiyama, 85.

that reflected her family's impoverished economic situation following the death of her father, marking the "beginning of literary self-awareness of Japanese women's situation" in the 1890s.⁷ In addition, many women entered the workspace, working in factories, fields, or doing domestic work.⁸ As well-off women worked toward an education and were allowed new economic opportunities, Japanese elite were forced to face the concept of a "New Woman" that did not solely operate under the patriarchal framework that had been instituted during the Edo period (1603-1868) of "good wife and wise mothers," but instead allowed women to value romantic love over family lines, and removed motherhood from the center of their identity as women.⁹

Taking after Higuchi in the early 1900s, Japanese privileged literary feminists, including Akiko, collected themselves together forming a society and publishing a magazine with the goals of highlighting the literary works of women and drawing attention to the social and economic issues that women faced.¹⁰ This society, named the *Seito* Society (or "Bluestocking Society") after the English Bluestocking salon, operated from 1911 until 1916, and members of this society published a magazine that included a wide range of literary styles produced by women, including poetry, short stories, plays, translations from Western pieces of literature, essays, and personal reflections.¹¹ However, it was not simply the writing of the *Seito* Society that made waves in

⁷ Pauline C. Reich and Atsuko Fukuda, "Japan's Literary Feminists: The "Seito" Group" in *Signs*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1976), 281.

⁸ Jan Bardsley, "Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women" in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, Joshua S. Mostow, Kirk Denton, Bruce Fulton, and Sharalyn Orbaugh, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 94.

⁹ Reich and Fukuda, 281; Rodd, 182-183; Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 251; Hiroko Tomida, "The Controversy Over the Protection of Motherhood and its Impact Upon the Japanese Women's Movement," *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004), 251-252; Kohiyama, 83.

¹⁰ Reich and Fukuda, 281-284.

¹¹ In the 18th century, aristocratic women with literary and intellectual interests beyond what English societal gender roles designated for them got together to have discussions about issues that were important to them, such as women's education. These women advocated that women had talents that ought to be recognized and utilized. Sarah Jane Boccardi Bassett, "Bluestocking Society," *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, vol. 1, edited by Jodi O'Brien (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 77-78. The Japanese Bluestocking Society was inspired by the English society because the elite Japanese women could relate to the elite English women. Sharon L.

Japan, but also the conduct of the members as Japan searched for a definition of a “New Woman.” The *Seito* Society was infamous for their sexual improprieties and challenges to femininity, which they wrote about honestly and published for the nation to see.¹² In doing so, the *Seito* Society physically challenged traditional gender roles in Japan, and through their publications about these physical challenges, the *Seito* Society challenged the definition of womanhood in ways that delinked womanhood from motherhood and femininity in the construction of the Japanese “New Woman.”

Historical writing on the *Seito* Society generally places the Society as a part of a larger narrative that looks at how literary journals and women’s writing impacted the modernization of Japan and the Japanese feminist movement.¹³ These scholars recognize the importance of the *Seito* Society, though they differ on what the Society’s most significant contributions to Japanese debates were, depending on the focus of their larger narratives. Some of these historians argue that the existence of female literary journals was both reflective of and a tool of the modernization of Japan.¹⁴ Others focus on the content of *Seito*’s publications and the ways

Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 163-164. See also the table of contents of Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, where she outlines the translations she has done of the work published by the *Seito* Society. Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 1; Lowy, 19; In addition, see Jan Bardsley, “The New Woman of Japan and the Intimate Bonds of Translation” in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, Vol. 20, *The Culture of Translation in Modern Japan* (2008), which outlines the ways that translation in the *Seito* Society was closely linked to the idea of the “new woman.”

¹² Wu, 64. See also Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women,” 94.

¹³ See Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women” where Bardsley offers a six-page chapter on the *Seito* Society as part of a larger history of East Asian Literature. See also Yasuko Claremont, “Modernising Japanese Women Through Literary Journals” in *Hecate*, Vol. 35, Issue 1/2 (2009), 42-56 in which Claremont uses the *Seito* Society as an example of how Japanese used literary journals as an intellectual space for conversation about the modernization of Japan. Claremont juxtaposes the *Seito* journal *Nyonin Geijutsu* (Women’s Arts, 1928-1932) which succeeded the *Seito* Society.

¹⁴ See Claremont, 43 and Lowy, 15-20. See also Angela Coutts, “Gender and Literary Production in Modern Japan: The Role of Female-Run Journals in Promoting Writing by Women during the Interwar Period” in *Signs*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2006), pp 167-195 in which Coutts analyzes the *Seito* Society as a female-run literary journal whose main contributions to the publishing of women’s work were directly challenging the censorship laws that

specific content contributed to larger debates, such as debates about motherhood.¹⁵ Still others focus on the importance of consciousness raising through the *Seito* publication about the broader feminist movement.¹⁶ Some scholarship, however, centers solely on the *Seito* Society. This scholarship is limited mostly to journal articles that demonstrate the political significance of a women's literary society in the late Meiji period in Japan to women's liberation.¹⁷ These scholars argue that increased space for women to publish writing that articulated social concerns to the broader Japanese public was central to the beginnings of the liberation movement.¹⁸ On a different note, historian Peichen Wu takes a new stance in their article, which focuses on the political implications of the scandalous actions of *Seito* Society members in their romantic relationships and how these scandals impacted public conversations surrounding the gender binary and intersections with sexuality in Japan.¹⁹ Connecting the outlined previous scholarship, this paper argues that the interpersonal relationships in the *Seito* Society and the political stances published in the widely distributed *Seito* journal redefined womanhood in a way that forced the construction of the Japanese "New Woman" to confront motherhood, identity, and femininity in new ways.

prevented many women's voices from being heard, and establishing women's writing as worthy of being purchased and read.

¹⁵ Hiroko Tomida, "The Controversy Over the Protection of Motherhood and its Impact Upon the Japanese Women's Movement" in *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004), pp. 243-271 in which Tomida places the *Seito* Society into a broader narrative of Japanese motherhood, arguing the Society's main contribution was theoretically disputing Japanese ideals of motherhood. According to Tomida, no physical action on the part of the *Seito* Society was taken.

¹⁶ Hiroko Tomida, *Hiratsuka Raicho and Early Japanese Feminism*, edited by H. Bolitho and K.W. Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 139-219.

¹⁷ See Bardsley, "The New Woman of Japan and the Intimate Bonds of Translation" in which Bardsley focuses on the importance of the act of translation to the *Seito* Society and the broader implications of the translations of Western works on a modernizing Japanese society. See also Reich and Fukuda, who discuss the ways that Raicho's writing specifically and explicitly challenged the societal ideal for Japanese women as "good wives and wise mothers."

¹⁸ See Reich and Fukuda, 284.

¹⁹ Wu, 64-86.

The debates over the definition of the term “New Woman” and modern gender roles in Japan predate the *Seito* Society by decades.²⁰ The Meiji period saw massive changes to the social and economic positionings of women both in Japan and abroad, and the reopening of trade with the West allowed for Enlightenment ideals to make their way to the Japanese elite.²¹ During the Meiji period, the Japanese government advocated mandatory elementary school for all children, including young girls.²² To increase broader literacy, the Japanese government also unified the written and spoken language, allowing access to writing to the public, rather than just the elite.²³ Increased literacy allowed some more opportunities for Japanese women, however, the Japanese government also instituted policies to promote the ideal of national unity, and make Japanese citizens view themselves as national subjects. To this end, the Japanese government promoted a patriarchal ideology that placed the emperor as the “father to the nation” and instituted a “constitution and civil code that made the patriarchal family unit the legal unit of society,” giving power over family members to the head of the family, the father.²⁴ For example, upon marriage wives lost all authority over their property to their husbands, and while adultery was condoned for husbands, it was a policed crime that could result in a jail sentence for a wife.²⁵ In addition to economic control over their wives, men also maintained physical control over their wives’ bodies, as abortion was illegal and motherhood was regarded as the most important work women would do.²⁶ Women’s education was expanded, but it was geared to training a woman to be a

²⁰ Sievers does an in-depth characterization of early Meiji debates regarding women. Sievers, 10-25.

²¹ Lowy, 4. Western Christian Missionaries arrived in Japan at this time with “cultural baggage” that emphasized the importance of “romantic love” in a relationship. Kohiyama, 87.

²² Lowy, 5 and Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 10-11.

²³ Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 10-11.

²⁴ Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 11.

²⁵ Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 11.

²⁶ Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 11.

“good wife and a wise mother,” rather than providing the education available to men.²⁷ In addition, the government passed laws in the late 1890s to bar women from any sort of political participation.²⁸ Thus, the 1910s saw literate elite women express their frustrations over a lack of political, economic, and social autonomy, and the *Seito* Society was born.

The *Seito* Society was founded in 1911 by Hiratsuka Raicho (1886-1971), Yasumochi Yoshiko (1885-1947), Mozume Kazuko (1888-1979), Kiuchi Teiko (1887-1919), and Nakano Hatsuko (1886-1983), all graduates of the newly established Japan Women’s College.²⁹ These women were inspired by other literary journals, including *Sirakaba* (*White Birch*), which was founded by novelists in 1910.³⁰ Members of *Sirakaba* believed that “developing one’s potential was of service to mankind,” and they criticized established authority.³¹ *Seito* women also saw room for critiques of established authority, and the founding members’ elite status and education allowed them financial backing to start an all-women’s journal dedicated to developing the potential of Japanese women and criticizing misogynistic social, economic, and political structures.³² In other words, the object of the *Seito* Society was to liberate women from traditional gender roles and codes of female morality, and allow women space to explore their individuality through literature.³³ Raicho wrote the manifesto for the Society, declaring, “When Japan was born, woman was the sun, the true human being. Now she is the moon! She lives in

²⁷ Reich and Fukuda, 281.

²⁸ Tomida, “The Controversy Over the Protection of Motherhood and its Impact Upon the Japanese Women’s Movement,” 244.

²⁹ Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women,” 94.

³⁰ Tomida, *Hiratsuka Raicho and Early Japanese Feminism*, 143.

³¹ Tomida, *Hiratsuka Raicho and Early Japanese Feminism*, 144.

³² Lowy, 14.

³³ Mikiso Hane, *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Rebel Women in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988), 20.

the light of another star.”³⁴ Raicho argued that women were true and authentic, but that society had taken that away, and through writing and literature women in Japan might shine again. The *Seito* journal ran from 1911 until 1916, but the Society saw a sharp decline in membership in 1913 due to societal pressures and tensions.³⁵ As a result, by 1916, “only those most committed to pressing their concerns” in a “risky cultural divide” remained in the *Seito* Society.³⁶ This is partially due to the tactic employed by the *Seito* Society writers of writing in a “confessional” style that required authors to describe deeply personal, usually societally unacceptable feelings to register discontent.³⁷ These writings, however, were most challenging to traditional Japanese gender roles, and despite (and sometimes, because of) critiques in the media, they opened space for new conversations about the ways that society views the intersections of gender and sex.

At the time that the *Seito* Society was publishing their magazine, societal structures were instituted to invalidate and prevent women from having agency in their sexualities; their sexualities existed as a means toward motherhood. To combat these societal norms, members of the *Seito* Society actively described and published their sexual thoughts in an effort to raise a social consciousness among other Japanese women so that a future push for a change in legislation could be made. For example, in 1912, Araki Iku published her “Letter” to the man she

³⁴ Hiratsuka Raicho, “Excerpt from the “Manifesto” in “Japan’s Literary Feminists: The “Seito” Group translated by Pauline C. Reich and Atsuko Fukuda, 287.

³⁵ Prior to this decline, thousands of Japanese women sent letters to the society requesting subscriptions, membership, and advice. The magazine often sold out, and with women sharing copies it is difficult to pin exact readership information, but it is believed to have been widespread. Bardsley, *The Bluesotkcings of Japan*, 3; Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, 95.

³⁶ Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, 95.

³⁷ Bardsley, “Seito and the Resurgence of Writing by Women” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, 94.

sexually desires who is not her husband.³⁸ In her letter she writes, “In the middle of the day, when I wander to the front gate, I’m not waiting for my husband’s return but hoping that I might by some chance run into you. . . . How my heart leaps every time I see a well-dressed young man of twenty-four or twenty-five.”³⁹ Describing her desire for another man while married is a political act, as it defies the institutionalized patriarchal structures that encouraged and demanded that Japanese women operate under the ideal of “good wives and wise mothers.” Instead, the Japanese “New Woman” of the 1900s desires other men when her marriage is failing; she values romantic love over the family structure. Iku goes so far as to directly critique the societal expectation that she maintain her sexual morality, writing, “All the same, we are a married couple that lives together without any quarrels. I, too, am a ‘chaste lady,’ you see, though such words are not ones with any appeal for me. What I want instead, if indeed I am a human being, is to feel completely enveloped by an earnest and human love.”⁴⁰ Here, Iku establishes that women having romantic desires is natural and inherent to their being a human being, a direct challenge to the Japanese ideal that good wives remain chaste. For Iku, sex is not solely about reproduction and maintaining the family structure, and through her letter she establishes her sexual agency. Publishing this letter to all of Japan at a time when adultery for women was a punishable crime raises female consciousness across Japan, as women identified with Iku’s sexual desires.⁴¹

In addition to discussing the active sexualities of Japanese women, the *Seito* Society also engaged in political debates relating to autonomy over the female body. More specifically, the

³⁸ Araki Iku, “The Letter” originally published in *Seito* 2.4 (April 1912), translated and reprinted by Jan Bardsley in *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 30-34.

³⁹ Iku, 32.

⁴⁰ Iku, 33.

⁴¹ The issue of the *Seito* magazine that “The Letter” appeared in was censored, but not until after the story had been widely distributed – it sold out in stores, saving the *Seito* Society from financial ruin. Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 28.

Seito Society debated issues such as abortion. Some members of the Society, like Ito Noe and Yamada Waka, saw abortion as unnatural and a disgrace to the state of Japan.⁴² However, members like Raicho saw contraception and abortion as tools women could use to “fulfill their own personal needs as *individuals*.”⁴³ Raicho believed that to liberate women, women had to be liberated as individuals, and this encompassed sexual liberation, which required the availability of abortion and contraception.⁴⁴ Simply engaging publicly in these debates led to the censorship of the *Seito* magazine. When Noe became the editor of *Seito*, in 1915, she published a debate on whether or not abortion was considered a “woman’s right” or “a crime lacking in consideration of mankind and the destruction of human morality,” which was suppressed due both to its commentary on abortion and to its commentary on the economic positions of many women considering abortion.⁴⁵ Overall, government opposition led to the complete suppression of five issues of *Seito*, and increased societal tensions that ultimately led to a dip in membership as many members could not take the pressure.⁴⁶

The *Seito* Society was able to contribute to the definition of the concept of a “New Woman” in Japan through their literary publications, but perhaps their most significant contribution to the deconstruction of traditional gender roles in Japan comes through their personal publications describing their female-female sexual relationships. While the *Seito*

⁴² Ito Noe quoted in Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 61-62. Noe is quoted saying “No matter how many excuses one might make to justify destroying this life for the sake of one’s own convenience in this or that area, is it not, in truth, a deed which insults nature? Is it not a deed which shows a complete disregard for *life*?” See also Yamada Wake quoted in Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 64. Wake is quoted arguing that “both abortion and contraception are equally great crimes. They are immoral acts that destroy the happiness of the individual as well as the prosperity of the nation.”

⁴³ Raicho quoted in Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 67.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Reich and Fukuda, 284.

⁴⁶ The *Seito* Society ultimately stopped publishing in 1916 as a result of the intense social and governmental pressures. Bardsley, “*Seito* and the Resurgence of Writing by Women” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*, 95.

Society published, Japanese media attempted to crack down on sexual improprieties, especially amid fears of female-female sexualities after the 1911 double-love-suicides.⁴⁷ Indeed, following the guidelines of “good wives and wise mothers,” a special issue of *Shin koron* (*New opinion*) in 1911 featured “Seiyoku ron (“A discourse on sexuality”)” which included an interview entitled “Senritsu subeki joseikan no tentoseiyoku” (“The revolting female sexual inversion”), which described appropriate behavior in women’s schools.⁴⁸ Educators in 1911 were now aware of the possibilities of female-female love suicides among their students, and thus spread propaganda to teachers warning them of the different terms used at various schools so that “women’s educations [could] seriously consider not only this problem but a resolution to this problem.”⁴⁹ The article also made a call to action, declaring that “for our social sanitation, the homosexual should sublimate his or her abnormal desire and must not transmit *it* to others.”⁵⁰

Combatting this propaganda directly, members of the *Seito* Society engaged in romantic relationships with each other. In her memoir, Raicho alludes to her sexual relationship with Otake Koichi, who she describes as a “boyish young girl with a nicely rounded face” who “looked dashing in her main’s kimono and hakama, and sometimes she wore a man’s kimono, with a narrow sash tied low on her waist.”⁵¹ Here Raicho makes specific note of the masculine gender performance Koichi takes through her clothing choices. Moreover, Raicho includes a

⁴⁷ Wu, 67.

⁴⁸ Wu, 69.

⁴⁹ The article describes the terms used to talk about female-female relationships at different schools so teachers can watch out and stop those conversations. According to the article, “‘Passion’ (*onetsu*) is used in Ochanomuzu Women’s School, ‘newness’ (*haikara*) in Gakushyuin Women’s School, and ‘friendship’ (*oshinyu*) in Atomi Women’s School, while in other women’s schools these kinds of words are also used.” Kuwaya Sadaitu, “Seiyoku ron” in *Shin koron* (September 1911), translated and printed by Peichen Wu in “Performing Gender along the Lesbian Continuum: The Politics of Sexual Identity in the Seito Society,” 69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵¹ Hiratsuka Raicho, *In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun: The Autobiography of a Japanese Feminist*, translated by Teruko Craig (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 175. See also Wu, 72-73.

letter to her from Koichi in her memoir, which describes how “members partook liberally of sake, beer, and wine,” actions the *Seito* Society were criticized for because liberally drinking was considered to be a masculine activity that could compromise the chastity of women.⁵² In other words, Raicho takes care to characterize Koichi as masculine, bending traditional Japanese gender roles. Raicho herself was characterized as being masculine, meaning that the relationship operated “more like a ‘male-color’ relationship than a lesbian one, in that both took on the ‘masculine’ identity.”⁵³ In this way, Raicho and Koichi demonstrate the intersections of gender, gender roles, and sexuality, as it appeared that two women had entered into a romantic relationship that could not be characterized as ‘lesbian’ due to the masculine gender portrayals of both Raicho and Koichi.⁵⁴ Newspaper reports attempted to characterize their relationship as a scandal to the public. A series of articles called “The So-Called New Woman” ran in the *Kokumin shinbun* which described Raicho and Koichi exiting “pleasure quarters” after they “tasted the offerings . . . to the full.”⁵⁵ These reports forced Japan to acknowledge female-female relationships in a different way than the suicides did – Japanese society had to characterize them not just as a death risk, but as an active idea being published in widely spread magazines.⁵⁶ Due to media reports and *Seito* articles, the intersections between gender, gender roles, and sexuality became a part of the Japanese “New Woman,” as members of the *Seito* Society publicly engaged in relationships that valued love over anything else and were inherently not centered on

⁵² Bardsley, *The Bluestockings of Japan*, 3.

⁵³ Wu, 78.

⁵⁴ Wu, 78.

⁵⁵ Raicho, 178.

⁵⁶ Previously, Japanese newspapers characterized female-female sexual relationships as a death risk in their coverage of attempted double love suicides in the early 1900s. Wu, 67.

motherhood, as women in same sex relationships could not be mothers.⁵⁷ Thus, *Seito* actions delinked motherhood and femininity from womanhood as *Seito* woman redefined womanhood outside the confines of heterosexual relationships and motherhood through their romantic relationships.

Raicho and Koichi were not the only members of the *Seito* Society to engage in a same-sex relationship. Indeed, Tamura Toshiko and Naganuma Chieko also engaged in a same-sex relationship, though their relationship was more closely rooted in the “heterosexual paradigm” as one of them took on the more “masculine” role in the relationship, while the other situated herself in the more “feminine” role.⁵⁸ In her novel, *Chills*, published in 1913, Toshiko expresses her disdain for being forced to operate in a “feminine” role in her marriage with her husband, writing that she does “like to let this man have a modest wife, a lovely and obedient woman to live with him. However, every time this thought strikes me, I cannot help crying out, because I can do nothing.”⁵⁹ She finds happiness, however, in a relationship with Chieko, in which Toshiko can take on a more “masculine” role in their relationship. She writes, “I have forgotten the fact that I am a woman and the requirements for being a woman since I met you . . . Every time I recall that we can live the women-only life without ‘man,’ I feel so happy, as though my body were sailing out over the huge sea.”⁶⁰ These two romantic *Seito* relationships were written about and published for Japanese readers, opening new space for conversations about the roles of men and women in relationships, and the roles of men and women in same-sex

⁵⁷ Only married couples had the legal right to adopt children, and same-sex couples could not be married. “Human Rights Law and Discrimination Against LGBT People in Japan,” *Amnesty International* (2017), 17.

⁵⁸ Tamura Toshiko was married at the time of this relationship to Tamura Shogyo. Wu, 72, 73.

⁵⁹ Tamura Toshiko, *Chills* (October 1913) translated by Peichen Wu, “Performing Gender along the Lesbian Continuum: The Politics of Sexual Identity in the *Seito* Society,” 74.

⁶⁰ Toshiko quoted in Wu, 74.

relationships more specifically. The *Seito* Society allowed for new debates surrounding love and sex, defining the concept of the Japanese “New Women” as outside of the heteronormative patriarchal binary established during the Meiji period.

The *Seito* Society’s contributions to the conversation amongst the Japanese elite about the definition of the Japanese “New Woman” redefined womanhood in a way that allowed women to exist within the confines of womanhood without resigning themselves to the patriarchal family unit. The Society published with the goal of raising consciousness about the issues women faced in Japan, laying important groundwork for future women’s liberation movements in Japan. Raicho argued that individual liberation was necessary for the liberation of all women, and the *Seito* magazine created space for individual women to navigate their place in society and find agency in their relationships and sexualities.⁶¹ Their publications allowed many Japanese women access to important narratives they had not previously been exposed to – for perhaps the first time, many women realized they were not alone in thinking sexual thoughts. In addition, the debates published by the *Seito* Society about social issues important to women encouraged women to engage politically, despite a lack of governmental support (and in fact, direct governmental deterrence). Political activism and engagement by women through *Seito* debates opened space for future advocacy for women’s rights. Finally, through their public romantic relationships, the *Seito* Society demonstrated a physical manifestation of the Japanese “New Woman” as someone who engaged in relationships out of romantic love, rather than out of traditional obligation to continue a family line in ways that confronted the gender binary institutionalized by the patriarchal family unit. Raicho and Kiochi engaged in a relationship that

⁶¹ Hane, 20.

was more “male-color” than lesbian due to both women assuming masculine roles in the relationship, though both women identified as such. In this way, Raicho and Kiochi demonstrated and publicized a loving relationship that was completely delinked from motherhood and femininity between two women, placing themselves into their new definition of womanhood that deconstructed patriarchal assumptions about women and femininity. Similarly, Toshiko and Chieko engaged in a same-sex relationship that mirrored more closely heterosexual gender roles, as one assumed a masculine position and one assumed a more feminine position; nonetheless, both identified as women, expanding the perception of what womanhood meant. Both of these relationships prescribed sexual agency to all parties involved. Overall, the *Seito* Society opened up new space for conversations surrounding gender, gender roles, and sexuality in the future women’s liberation movement. The *Seito* Society also contributed to Japan’s defining of the “New Woman” of Japan, a new conception of gender roles and womanhood that shaped future Japanese society.

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