

TAWARA MACHI'S BISYMMETRICAL SELF

CLAIRE PATZNER

*B.A. Candidate in Literatures in English and East Asian Studies
Cornell University, Class of 2022*

Tawara Machi was a quiet high school teacher in Japan when she published her collection of poetry titled *Salad Anniversary*. No one could have expected the success of a contemporary book of poetry in Japan, especially one that used the traditional tanka poetry form. Yet, the collection sold well over two million copies and became one of Japan's most popular books. There are multiple factors that contributed to the success of Tawara's book, but the revitalization of the traditional tanka form to capture and memorialize ephemeral or otherwise forgotten everyday moments was one of the biggest factors. While Tawara used the well-established tanka form, she rejuvenated it past simply discussing seasons and emotions to include topics that would appeal to a larger and more modern audience. However, some critics claim that her poetry is anti-feminist and one-note, citing the common trope of the "waiting woman" that she took from ancient female poets, who mainly discussed domestic activities and unreciprocated love from men. While some poems in this collection do utilize this trope, I believe she challenges and expands upon it. I also believe that her poetry contains multitudes, which she acknowledges as her "bisymmetrical self," allowing us to see different aspects of herself and her life. Waiting for a lover is a prominent theme in Tawara's poetry, but so are leaving lovers, happiness in loneliness, and moments of life separate from her romantic pursuits.

In Sarah Strong's critique of the feminine influences in Tawara's poetry, she states that much of the emotional focus of Tawara's poems is on a woman who suffers and waits for her lover. Strong, who is a former Japanese literature professor, argues that Tawara was influenced by ancient female tanka writers who fell into the characterization of the "waiting woman" and wrote typically about the wait for the return of a lover and unreciprocated affections.¹ Although there are a few poems in this collection that a reader could point to with this emotional connotation and the "waiting woman" characterization, there are just as many poems in this collection that move past this trope and focus instead on a woman who easily moves on from relationships and even makes men wait for her. Furthermore, the "waiting" poems that Strong cites in her argument are not overly emotional and contain nuances that push the trope further.

In a poem Strong cites as an example, Tawara writes "For whom, / for what am I waiting? / The verb to wait / turns utterly / intransitive."² While this poem

¹ Strong, Sarah M. "Passion and Patience: Aspects of Feminine Poetic Heritage in Yosano Akiko's Midaregami and Tawara Machi's Sarada Kinenbi." *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 25 2 (1991), 184-85.

² Tawara Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, trans. Juliet Winters Carpenter. (Tokyo: Kodansha

contains the verb “wait” and features a female narrator that waits, I would not classify this as a “waiting woman” poem. Upon further inspection, this poem seems to question and criticize the act of waiting, emphasizing its purposelessness. The poem begins with “for whom” and then repeats the idea in “for what” in the next line, highlighting the exhaustion of the narrator. The “for what” also implies that the narrator may not even be waiting for a person in particular, but perhaps a feeling or an action. The grammatical term used in the last line is interesting, as an “intransitive” verb is a verb that doesn’t contain a direct object, which, in this case, hints at the lack of a direct object (or person) in the narrator’s “waiting,” making it purposeless. This poem remains vague due to its short length and versatility, but I believe that the poem criticizes the “waiting woman” just as much as it embodies it because of the repetition and use of the word “intransitive.” The repetition shows Tawara’s exhaustion with the trope and the use of a verb without a direct object shows the purposelessness of Tawara waiting.

Tawara never seems to cling onto dying romances or crumble when they end. Even in poems of waiting, she never seems to wait for a lover for longer than the length of a phone call or a Saturday afternoon. In poems such as “Like getting up to leave / a hamburger place – / that’s how I’ll leave / that man,” Tawara emphasizes her competence to leave a lover as much as she waits for a lover, as well as her strength in times of heartbreak.³ When leaving a hamburger place, an example of Tawara’s frequent use of modern objects, one doesn’t look back or hesitate. The encounter is swift and emotionless. This lack of emotion is emphasized again in a poem where she says matter-of-factly, “Passing each other on escalators / headed in opposite ways – / happy to be with you if only for a / moment.”⁴ Here, the narrator doesn’t mourn the separation with a lover but is simply grateful for the time they shared together. This poem is compelling because it shows that Tawara is a liberated, independent woman who won’t let a man dissuade her from pursuing her own path and ambitions.

In another poem about a past romance, Tawara says, playfully, “Thinking you too must be / listening to this radio show / I turn it off mid-laugh,” perhaps no longer wanting to share a connection or tie to this lover.⁵ Yet, while she still thinks of these past loves, she can be sarcastic, laugh and make light of her pain. In other poems she makes lovers wait for her for lengths of “five years” or applauds teenage girls in middy blouses keeping people waiting. When she does decide to wait for a man, she is equally able to turn the tables on him and make him wait for her, have him play her games.

It becomes clear in this collection that Tawara Machi can experience the multiple facets of heartbreak, not simply the pain and anguish dependent upon a man’s departure. There is a part of Tawara that is strong in the face of pain—a part that easily

International, 1987), 12.

³ Tawara Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 6.

⁴ Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 9.

⁵ Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 9.

moves from lover to lover and challenges the tired characterization of the “waiting woman.” However, Tawara does not merely reject the character of the waiting woman in herself; she sometimes acknowledges and accepts the part of herself that wallows in pain and awaits phone calls from a lover that sometimes does not reciprocate her attention. In doing so, she realizes that she is a person that contains multitudes—a “365-faced polyhedron.”⁶ In the section of poems aptly titled “Bisymmetrical Self,” Tawara notes this split of her character. She writes, “Caught between two choices / I lie spread-eagled / in perfect bilateral symmetry,”⁷ addressing that she can simultaneously feel two seemingly dissonant emotions following the end of a relationship. Critic Sekine Eiji, a professor of Japanese Literature and a translator of Tawara’s poetry, notes this in his review of her poetry, pointing to two example poems: “The flow of the river— / whatever I compare it to / leaves out the stones at the bottom” and “Sucking on a sugar cube / at the wane of spring / I strip off my T-shirt of my twenty-third year.”⁸ He states:

The way the second poem deals with sadness and stagnation is typically a Tawara narrator's way: she wants to overcome the negative feeling and move on. The first poem suggests, however, a different approach. It sketches the simple truth of the thing: the flow of the water goes on, but the stones remain immobile at the bottom. The way in which the poem is worded implicitly suggests the narrator's resistance to convention, according to which one should follow the flow of life that goes on like the flowing river. The narrator's desire to live with the leftover emotions from the past, which remain at the depth of her heart, is given an indirect expression through her gaze at natural scenery.⁹

Sekine notes that the first poem’s depiction of her viewing the river reflects Tawara’s recognition that the river, or life, must continue flowing on, in spite of any impediment like two lovers parting.¹⁰ Yet, Sekine continues by saying that, as she grieves, she feels like a stone sitting at the bottom of the river, dejectedly observing its flow. He also observes that the next poem describes her wallowing in this same grief as she sucks on a sugar cube.¹¹ Tawara realizes spring will quickly disappear and she will move into the next year, but she cannot help but sit in this grief for a moment.

Some critics may highlight this apparent passivity of her poetic character to pin her as an anti-feminist who does not innovate on the well-established feminine form of the tanka. However, this evaluation of Tawara does not take into consideration the capacity of her poetry having two available, seemingly contradictory interpretations owing to her bisymmetrical self. Juliet Winters Carpenter, the English

⁶ Tawara, Machi. *Salad Anniversary*, 11.

⁷ Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 27.

⁸ Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 22.

⁹ Sekine Eiji, “Notes on the Tanka and Tawara Machi,” *Simply Haiku: A Quarterly Journal of Japanese Short Form Poetry* 4, no.3 (Autumn 2006), 3-4.

¹⁰ Eiji, “Notes on the Tanka and Tawara Machi.”

¹¹ Eiji, “Notes on the Tanka and Tawara Machi.”

translator of *Salad Anniversary*, acknowledges that Tawara is not an aggressively feminist writer and is passive at times, especially when compared to her contemporary female poet counterparts. Carpenter says that this may surprise Western readers, who are “accustomed to the pervasive influence of the women’s liberation movement.”¹² Carpenter acknowledges that Tawara draws inspiration from Heian norms regarding femininity, in which women would wait behind their curtains patiently for their lover(s). However, Carpenter goes on to argue that there are many poems that demonstrate the ways in which Tawara values her independence, shies away from long term relationships, and doesn’t actively seek a lover as a sole form of joy.¹³ Carpenter’s argument here and her concession regarding Tawara’s Heian-style passivity support the notion that inherent to Tawara’s poetry is a character that simultaneously values independence and passivity. Additionally, because Western critics and readers only typically examine her work through translation, some of the quality in the original text is lost. There are some words and phrases in Japanese that we don’t have an exact word for in English. Fortunately, Tawara uses conversational language and so the vocabulary translates well. However, the lines also are broken up differently in the translated text to accommodate for the transition of languages. This is partially due to the differences in syllable and vowel sounds in English and Japanese. In the English translations of Tawara’s poetry, almost none of them stick to the syllable counts in the original poetry which follows the traditional tanka form. Even between two English translations of the same Tawara poem, the meanings are distinct. Different translators may choose to focus more on getting the syllable count right instead of trying to best convey the original tone of the tanka and vice versa. All these factors further contribute to the misinterpretation of the feminism in Tawara’s collection of poetry.

Furthermore, while many of the poems in this collection relate to romances, another significant portion of the poems focus on the ephemeral moments of daily life. Tawara’s non-romantic writing suggests that her poetic character extends well beyond being a mere “waiting woman.” Given that this non-romantic form of expression was a major aspect that contributed to the success of her collection, the non-waiting-woman aspect of her character was significant enough to appeal to many readers. Just as people could relate to Tawara’s astute observations on love, people could also relate to her cherishing of otherwise forgotten moments. In the titular poem, Tawara memorializes an inconsequential moment in which she shared salad with someone: “This tastes great’ you said and so / the sixth of July / our Salad Anniversary.”¹⁴ This poem highlights the way that she appreciates the simple moments. Even though there are other moments of celebration around this time in Japan, such as Tanabata Day, she focuses on a time she spent with someone in which

¹² Juliet Winters Carpenter, “Tawara Machi: To Create Poetry Is to Live,” *Japan Quarterly* 36, no.2 (1989), 193.

¹³ Carpenter, “Tawara Machi: To Create Poetry Is to Live,” 193.

¹⁴ Tawara, Machi. *Salad Anniversary*, 24.

they enjoyed something great together. Although this poem focuses on a moment that she spent with someone she loves, many other poems in this collection focus on moments that she spent alone and appreciated just as deeply.

The poems in this collection focus on a range of topics including Tawara's hometown, her trip to the China sea, her visits to see family, and her experience as a teacher. Even someone who is not particularly impressed by love poems is sure to find some relatability in her vast number of topics. Tawara makes sure to focus on common experiences and finds beauty in ordinary moments. In one of these poems about ordinary moments, she writes, "In my hometown, children's boots / running in the snow / like a sprinkling of bright gumdrops."¹⁵ Someone else passing by might not even notice something like this, but Tawara is a careful and mindful observer of these beautiful small moments. This poem is simple in that it uses simile to compare children's boots to bright gumdrops. However, the image of bright boots in the white snow and the image of children running is so vivid and evocative. It is relatable in that it is an image many readers have likely seen and can be brought back to. The image itself is very freeing and playful and has the capacity to remind the reader of their youth or make them feel nostalgic.

In another poem, Tawara writes about the joy of drinking cheap saké in a street stall after a shower. While this poem contains imagery that a lot of people in Japan would be familiar with, she also uses a great deal of Western consumerist imagery, such as McDonald's, Coca Cola, and jazz music. Whether it's toast in the morning, celery in her bicycle basket, a stranger buying coke from a vending machine at dawn, or the croquettes frying in the back of a butcher shop, Tawara can find joy in little moments. She makes the ephemeral moments into poems that can last forever. Carpenter notes in her analysis that Tawara is not concerned about what continues forever but what lasts forever. What lasts forever, Carpenter argues, is the beauty of ordinary things, ordinary moments, appreciated and lived in fully," emphasizing Tawara's ability to beautify the ordinary and appeal to a wide base of readers.¹⁶ Ultimately, the essence of her poetry is not that of a lovesick waiting woman but, rather, that of a woman who captures the everyday slice of life moments. These moments are bisymmetrical in that some may involve heartbreak and some may involve a yearning for independence, but at their core, they are all short glimpses into her everyday life.

All in all, Tawara's poetry is successful commercially and critically because of her capacity as a poet to acknowledge her own complexity and apparent contradictory thoughts; it is this self-awareness that makes her poetry easily relatable to many readers. She is a woman with her own goals who does not cling to men or romances, but at the same time, she recognizes that there is a part of her that is passive and wants to wait

¹⁵ Tawara Machi, *Salad Anniversary*, 26.

¹⁶ Carpenter, "Tawara Machi: To Create Poetry Is to Live," 199.

for her lovers and grieve the end of a relationship. Her poetry cannot be defined by her use of tanka form or her playing with a common characterization. Her poetry centers on little moments that any ordinary person can experience, which is the main theme of her *Salad Anniversary* collection. There is a significant, relatable power in her poetry, even if it's not radically feminist or groundbreaking in format.

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