

A Subculture of Their Own —Écriture Shōjo and Banana Yoshimoto's *The Lake*—

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1. Abstract

This article examines the characteristics which have become intrinsic to shōjo literature in an attempt to establish a framework hereby referred to as *écriture shōjo*, based on the premise that shōjo culture relies on the construction of a ‘third gender’, defined by Judith Butler as ‘a category that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description’ (153), in order to explore new means of gender expression and develop them within a closed system of reproduction. The author performs a textual analysis of Banana Yoshimoto’s *The Lake* within this framework, focusing on its idiosyncratic and subversive depiction of family, gender, and sexuality in a world defined by emotional signifiers.

2. Introduction

Shōjo as a cultural phenomenon has seen representation in multiple mediums, such as novels, manga, illustrations, or film, since its emergence in the early twentieth century, and is seen as a subculture intimately linked to the gender politics of modernised Japan (Takahashi 116). Banana Yoshimoto, a writer who made their debut in the late 1980s, is credited for introducing the shōjo tradition into contemporary Japanese literature and redefining the boundaries of Japan’s ‘pure’ literary values, pushing them towards ‘a new sort of literature’ (Mitsui and Washida 143).

Yoshimoto’s association with shōjo culture has been pointed out by critics soon after her debut (Mitsui and Washida; Treat, ‘Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject’; Ōtsuka). Aesthetically, her works have been described as ‘manga without images’ (Mitsui and Washida 71), using wordless connections and a system of signifiers defined by shōjo tradition to build her literary landscape (Ōtsuka 196-201). Yoshimoto herself has been described as a ‘the perfect shōjo’ due to her carefree manner and style

(Treat, 'Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject' 378), and she attributes her values to being part of a generation that was raised by manga and TV (357-59).

Though Yoshimoto's ties to shōjo culture are rarely disputed, its depth is left up for debate. Western criticism tends to take on Yoshimoto's style as idiosyncratic, or pair her up with Haruki Murakami due to their common international popularity (Murakami; Nagaike; Haga). Aspects of her works are sometimes traced to Orientalist perspectives of 'Japaneseness' wherein Noh theatre is seen as a more defining historical antecedent than manga (Gibney)¹. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some deny her link to Japanese literary tradition entirely, seeing her as 'global', 'hip', and 'in step with global youth culture', rather than as 'Japanese' (Sherif 256). Additionally, shōjo and postmodernism are seen as dichotomous, rather than overlapping (Nagaike), and Yoshimoto's shōjo aesthetics are differentiated from her gender politics (Beck). Lacking a set definition of what shōjo culture entails, Yoshimoto's writing seems like an overlapping phenomenon, rather than part of a greater, unified current.

To combat this, this article introduces the term 'écriture shōjo' to refer to the intrinsic values of shōjo literature. The term 'écriture feminine' was introduced by Hélène Cixous as a model of aesthetics which is written by women, for women, subversive by nature in its expression of the repressed values which are forced upon feminine desire and female bodies. Where écriture feminine is created by the embodied desires and repression given the writers' position as women, as we will see later in this article, the shōjo goes beyond the traditional scope of a woman, becoming a cultural 'third gender' of contemporary Japan. The concept of écriture is strongly tied to both the inherent qualities of the writer and their culturally constructed gender identity, and to the manner in which these values are subversive of mainstream discourse when self-represented within an alternate system of production.

This article aims to expand upon the concept and characteristics of écriture shōjo and relate them to Banana Yoshimoto's writing using textual analysis. Part 2 will present the shōjo's cultural framework and reasoning for defining the shōjo as a 'third gender' based on previous literature. In Part 3, Yoshimoto's *The Lake* will be analysed using this framework.

3. The Formation of Shōjo Culture and Its Écriture

The shōjo can constitute their own gender, neither male nor female but rather something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual

reproduction and capitalist economy as they devote themselves to the self rather than to their marriage or career. (Treat, 'The Shōjo in Japanese Popular Culture' 282-83)

Gender is traditionally binary, a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations' which is systematically redefined via repetitive gender acts and performance within the heterosexist matrix (Butler 14). Subversive, radical gender identities are referred to as a 'third gender', 'a category that radically problematizes both sex and gender as stable political categories of description' (153).

When talking about women's writing, Helene Cixous states that it 'lets the other language speak – the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death' (358). *Écriture féminine* is an intrinsically subversive discourse formed by women, for women, challenging phallogocentric language and redefining the boundaries between genders. But where femininity relies on the suppressed body and provides a reactionary rhetoric of difference, *shōjo* is a self-made gender – an alternate vision of girlhood, rather than a rebuke against patriarchy (Shamoon 13).

As such, I propose the term 'écriture *shōjo*' to refer to the discourse and values characteristic to the *shōjo* subculture, formed and reproduced by the members of its community within the same cultural framework. This framework includes a non-heterosexist performance of gender, non-traditional familial values. Its aesthetics rely on interiority, subjective experience and an emotional understanding of space and time. Consistency within the world of *shōjo* is maintained via a closed cycle of reproduction.

3.1. *Shōjo* as Subculture

Literally meaning 'girl', the word '*shōjo*' was introduced in the late nineteenth century. Initially, it was tied to a conservative construction of gender roles, which saw adolescent girls as 'unused sexual resources' and privileged bodies of the bourgeoisie (Takahashi 115-16). But where the term emerged as an element of coercive difference, it has undergone considerable change over the past century thanks to the development of its own, increasingly subversive, voice.

What counts as '*shōjo*' is still unclear. The Kyoto International Manga Museum simply defines it as 'works that are initially published in *shōjo* manga magazines' (qtd. in Monden 2). However, *shōjo* literature's is not restricted to sequential art, and many *shōjo* manga series are published outside specialised magazines. There is no universal set definition of what is and what is not *shōjo*; often, it has to be recognised by its

aesthetics and core values, which maintain a sense of continuity (Monden 1-2).

As pointed out by Marc Steinberg in his introduction to Ōtsuka Eiji's *World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative*, the term 'subculture' has a different valence in Japan: where subculture in the West is oppositional, Japanese subcultures refer to segments of the populations and micromarkets. These subcultures develop their own worldview using various media to reinforce the reality of a particular narrative until it becomes its own world. The elements of shōjo are constantly evolving, but they all function within a consistent framework, and progress based on elements linked to previous developments within the genre, rather than on external factors. The shōjo subculture, its aesthetics and values, exist strictly within the realm of its subculture, and are only affected by members of its community. Contemporary shōjo writers are primarily the shōjo readers of the previous generation, writing from a shōjo perspective, aimed at a shōjo audience – even its academic criticism initially came from fans of shōjo manga who credited the movement for shaping their world view (Takahashi 132-33). This closed cycle of production assures écriture shōjo's consistency within a fabricated community (Prough 59).

3.2. Shōjo Culture's Coming of Age

Even the early waves of shōjo literature did not fit perfectly with the 'the ideal, fully Oedipalised, heterosexual woman' which is normally the target of women's pop culture (Fuss 713). Staples of shōjo culture and aesthetics can be traced to pre-war period female-oriented mangas, novels, illustrations (*jojō-ga*), and magazines, though they were few in number and had a restricted audience (Ōgi, 'Gender Insubordination in Manga for Girls' 171; Thorn, 'Shōjo Manga—Something for the Girls'). It was not until the 1970s that shōjo manga would attract mainstream attention.

Where the forerunners of shōjo manga writers were all male, by the 1970s the great majority of them were female, with the 'Year 24 group' (*24 nen-gumi*) as their main representatives. They helped the genre evolve towards a new aesthetic which could fit the description of 'écriture féminine': written by women, aimed at a female audience, and that attempted to embody and represent strictly female problems related to love, sex, and employment (Prough 89-90; Takahashi 130).

An entire generation of girls – Yoshimoto included – grew up reading such comics, and shōjo manga defined their idea of romance (Yokomori 1-3; Thorn, 'What Japanese Girls Do with Manga'). However, as Fujimoto Yukari points out, the depiction of traditional shōjo romance was often unrealistic and perpetuated the toxic

idea that self-esteem depends on a boy's approval, encouraging young girls to wait for their knight in shining armour; by defining romance around this idea, Fujimoto considers 1970s shōjo as functioning within the boundaries of traditional power relations between genders (*Where Do I Belong?* 12-45). However, as shōjo matured, so has its values.

In the 1980s, The genre of Ladies' Comics took over the market for sexually explicit stories for women who choose to follow a traditional path towards marriage and motherhood (Fujimoto, *The Shape of Women's Desire* 84), and with storylines catering to traditional gendered relations transferred towards the ladies' comic genre, shōjo literature could further focus on alternative lifestyles and goals: Ladies' comics are aimed at those who are unable to become shōjos (Ōgi, 'Female Subjectivity and Shoujo Manga' 785-86).

We can talk about écriture shōjo by observing the shōjo literature of the 1990s and beyond. By that point, cross-dressing, androgyny and subversion of traditional gender categories had become a staple of shōjo manga (Welker 158-59). Its ideas of romance become transgressive, as the protagonists' romantic goals switch from gaining a lover's approval towards gaining one's understanding (Fujimoto, *Where Do I Belong?* 38). The concept of family itself is redefined: non-traditional families featuring single parents, orphans and stepparents become common place (78-79), and a new family emerges, connected by emotional ties and symbols, rather than by blood (81-84; 98-100). Feelings take over institutions, as traditional families are no longer considered the key to happiness, and the non-traditional structure is accepted; both types of families can be equally happy – or unhappy (84-88). Femininity is traditionally defined by binary gender expression, heterosexuality and the institution of the family; dismantling these values allows for the 'third gender' to emerge outside the heterosexual matrix.

3.3. The Shōjo Worldview

Ōtsuka Eiji identifies signification of reality (*kigou*) as a central aspect of shōjo literature (89). When compared to realistic representation of reality (*shasei*), signification offers the reader a stronger sense of belonging to the literary world, as it defies realistic spatio-temporal conventions and allows the reader to have a stronger tie to the fictional space. Shōjo occurs in an everflowing present, in a place spatially unbounded – shōjo topography is emotional, not geographical (184-89). Physical location and time are marked by memories and feelings, rather than by coordinates and

time-slots.

Reading shōjo literature is not meant to be a form of escapism, but an exploration of the subjectivity and of an instinct which is otherwise repressed by civilisation (Shamoon 87; Marcuse 197). The reader is meant to become immersed in the character's feelings, dreams and memories, and identify with the character as Self, rather than as Other. To do so, they use semiotic codes as emotional reference points (Sanchez 65). Plot progression is emotion-dependent; alternate sizes and close-ups are used to visually signify emotional change; sidetracks from the main storyline introduce an element of nostalgia which reinforces an event's emotional burden. The shōjo text is unapologetically hyperreal, and the reader is invited to immerse and explore the emotions within.

When it comes to gender expression and sexuality, shōjos are far from being femme fatales. Since they are meant to be identified with, rather than desired, they are often non-descript in appearance. Shōjos are more *kawaii* than traditionally attractive. Androgyny and neutrality (*chuusei*) are often featured in shōjo literature (Shamoon 131) – Boy's love mangas take this a step further by having the main character a male that the female reader is supposed to identify with in a manner free of predefined gender norms. The shōjos do not fall in love with overtly masculine men – rather, they fall in love with shōnen, 'pale in complexion and sensitive in features' (Treat, 'Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject' 375). Shōjo are strongly linked to purity and innocence (Shamoon 3), and, together with their shōnen counterparts, their bodies exist outside the capitalist mode of production due to their avoidance of intercourse and traditional heterosexual relationships.

Heterosexual desire is replaced with passionate friendships. Sex is substituted by euphemisms, bed scenes and symbolism. 'Sexuality takes the form of sensuality: the unintentional meeting of gazes, fingers brushing accidentally, an impulsive embrace' (Sanchez 67). Heterosexist aesthetics are abandoned in favour of an intimacy defined by romantic and platonic love.

Initially, this was due to the construction of the idea of shōjo based on the cultural values of the early 20th century, where young girls were 'good wives, wise mothers' in training and their sexual agency was denied. However, even with the advent of feminism and increased freedom of sexual expression, the initial alternate expressions of sexuality have persisted. Sex scenes are now allowed in shōjo literature, but a century of alternate values of romantic expression have inevitably tied them with the image of the shōjo. Though eagerly embraced by the Ladies' Comics genre, shōjo

culture still prefers its sensual alternatives, and a hand-holding scene weighs more heavily than a night of sex. In the world of shōjo, signifiers always trump reality.

4. *The Lake as Écriture Shōjo*

Somewhere in Tokyo, Chihiro has the habit of standing at her window, looking out. On the second floor of the building diagonally opposite to hers, Nakajima does the same. Eventually, they notice one another; they exchange nods, mouth out their hellos, wave, and feel as if they are living a shared life despite never having met.

Neither of us realised what was happening. That simply by keeping an eye on each other, without even giving it any thought, just by noticing the sound of a certain window sliding open, we were already starting to fall in love. (Yoshimoto 29)

Shortlisted for the Man Asian literary prize, *The Lake* was released in Japan in 2005 and translated into English in 2011. The fact that Yoshimoto would include the Aum Shinrikyo group in the story was marketed in a sensationalistic manner, though, as it will be seen later in the article, it was not done so in the manner that the Western reader would expect. Rather, the story follows the development of the relationship between the two main characters.

4.1. *The Shōjo and the Shōnen*

Gender expression in Banana Yoshimoto's works cannot be said to follow any conventions, but when they do, they are those established by shōjo culture (Nagaike 99-101; Kellerman 59; Treat, 'Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject' 364).

Chihiro is a typical Yoshimoto protagonist; 'a twenty-something, sensitive, introspective, modern heroine' (Sanchez 64) living in Tokyo who is trying to deal with the recent loss of her mother. Chihiro is never described in the story, allowing the reader to identify with her entirely. As a narrator, she describes her every thought and action thoroughly and directly, leaving little for the reader to guess.

On the other hand, Nakajima is described extensively throughout the novel by Chihiro's female gaze:

Those pinched nostrils, his stick-thin wrists and long fingers, the way his mouth gaped as he slept, the almost touching scrawniness of his neck, the childish fullness of his cheeks, and the way his smooth hair tumbled over his eyes, so that his narrow eyes themselves, with their long eyelashes, seemed to be hiding ...

(Yoshimoto 24)

That and the lankiness of his silhouette against the window, and the fact that it made such a perfect picture. Sometimes he let his scrawny arm dangle down over the sill, and I thought he looked wonderful when he did that, like a wild monkey (28).

To allow shōjos to exist outside the heterosexist paradigm, the shōnen has to be equally gender subversive. Nakajima fulfils his role as the shōnen, not featuring hegemonically masculine features, straying from institutionalised concepts of the body, and being mysteriously instantly linked to the main character (Nagaike 98; Sanchez 69; Treat, ‘The Shōjo in Japanese Popular Culture’ 294).

I [Chihiro] felt like I was with a little boy, and my heart ached. Because he cried like a child. It was as if his tears had nowhere to go, they were meant for god alone. (Yoshimoto 42)

As other characters point out throughout the story, the interaction between them has little to do with traditional gender interaction. It is Chihiro who has to take the role of the ‘hero’ and save Nakajima, who is in distress and often cries in front of her. Chihiro breaks the fourth wall when what should be an iconic love scene in a romantic story setting goes amiss:

What the hell? I was thinking, a bit ruefully. This isn’t love, its volunteer work. This should be the scene where the guy is moved and embraces the girl, right? C’mon! (184)

Foucault states that sexuality is an ‘especially dense transfer point for relations of power’, and that by playing with the system of networks which define it, one can find new means of expressing their sexuality (103-14). Chihiro and Nakajima’s role reversal is one such means of redefining the heterosexual experience. The shōjo as a third gender emerges based on such subversive experiments with institutionalised heterosexism.

Together, Chihiro and Nakajima work to heal one another, rather than aim for an idealised romance. The relationship goal of their shōjo romance lies in mutual understanding, not in unilateral conquest. Achieving this goal means that they can become family, rather than a ‘happily ever after’ couple.

4.2. The New Family

Where the traditional Japanese family was strict and vertically structured, Yoshimoto’s family is horizontal, as her characters bond and heal together to form new,

unique, groups (Murakami 65). Ueno Chizuko succinctly describes the Yoshimoto novel as that of an ‘experience of a non-biological pseudo-family created by a young girl otherwise parentless’ (30). Chihiro comes from what one would perceive as a broken family, though she does not consider it as such. Her mother was the *mama* at a small-town bar, and was not married to her father. Before the start of the novel, her mother falls ill and passes away.

As I stood there on the platform, the hard reality of my mom’s imminent death would fuse with my memories of her, and with the air of boredom that clung to the people around me as they went about their ordinary lives—everything bled together, and I felt lost. I had no idea where I belonged, whether I was an adult or a child, where my home was, where my roots were. My head began to swim.

I was so agonized, I couldn’t even think, *Why don’t you fall in love with Nakajima, then? Let him be more of a comfort. Go on, put yourself in his hands! Wouldn’t it be nice to see that figure in the window up close?* No, it never even occurred to me. (Yoshimoto 30)

Separated from her biological family, she slowly builds herself a new one, with Nakajima – who is also motherless and has a distant relationship with his remaining biological family:

“I know, it hurts when your mom dies,” Nakajima said. “It was hard for me, too.”

Not knowing much about his background, I simply thought:

So he doesn’t have a mother, either.

“Yeah.” I sniffled. “But it’s a road we all have to walk, right?”

I squeezed the big cup of chai between my hands as if I were hugging it to me, clinging to it. And then, the very next moment, all the things I’d had to confront in such a short space of time, and the fear that maybe I no longer really had a home or a family to go back to—all that lifted, just a little, and I felt free, at ease. (33)

Their common loss and lack of belonging becomes the foundation for their relationship. Yoshimoto uses healing and rebirth to establish familiarity between selves that are essentially connected (Murakami 75-76; Ōtsuka 196-97). Chihiro is not necessarily turning to Nakajima for comfort and salvation from her negative emotions; rather, he accepts them, and offers to walk alongside her on the path of emotional healing. Their pseudo-family serves not only as a replacement for their real one, but as the

construction of a space where they belong.

4.3. Shōjo Sexuality

“Actually, it’s not easy for me to have sex.”

He was gazing up at the ceiling.

“Ahh ... really?” I said.

I felt a light tremor of surprise, as if he had confessed that he loved me.

(Yoshimoto 36)

Chihiro is not very interested in sex. Though she has had sexual experiences in the past, following the death of her mother she has become incapable of feeling sexual urges (37), and she had split up with her previous boyfriend due to his pressuring sexual advances (38). She considers this as one of the main reasons for her attraction to Nakajima, who seems equally uninterested. They did have sex on their first night together, but it was a disaster, so they do not try a second time.

This arrangement is far more intimate to Chihiro than a regular relationship would be, as she feels comfortable having him around at night, and his presence fills her with a sense of familial love that allows her to dream of her mother once more.

When something unpleasant happened during the day, I used to come home and pet my cat to cheer myself up. Being with Nakajima seemed to have a similar effect, neutralizing the poison that had accumulated inside me.

My old self would probably have come in without saying a word and tried to forget it all by having sex with whoever I was sleeping with just then, not talking to him about what had happened, keeping everything bottled up inside. That shows you how much respect I had for my lovers.

But Nakajima was different, I thought. This time it was for real. (131)

Every day, Chihiro returns home to see Nakajima waiting for her, and they have dinner together. Their bond becomes stronger with each passing day, and Chihiro’s apartment slowly becomes a love nest, a place where they both feel at home.

The societal pressures of a heterosexist society make their way into their talks, though, as Nakajima is worried that he is less of a man because of his inability to have sex.

“Just look at me, though. I can hardly have sex with a girl I like.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m not into sex, anyway.” (98)

As the heroine, Chihiro reassures her partner. The lack of sex in their relationship goes against the norms of sex as the defining aspect of heterosexuality. Given the shōjo

nature of their relationship, traditional issues surrounding female characters, such as marriage and pregnancy, are averted. Though Nakajima does propose to Chihiro, in a manner, it is more symbolic than the traditional proposal of a romance setting would have it, as he simply states that:

I've decided I'm going to live with you like this for the rest of my life. . . .
That's just how it has to be. Because I can live with you, even though I can't live with anyone else. And I'm tired of always being by myself. I'm tired of sleeping alone, with that wire rack under my arm. Now that I know what it's like not to be on my own, I can't go back to living the way I was before. (114)

It is in a shōjo's nature to escape from labour and responsibility (Mitsui and Washida 116). Pregnancy is mentioned in passing as a potential 'end to everything', though the lack of sex in their relationship prevents it from being a problem. The topic of money is brought up only to make it clear that it is not a problem for either character; moreover, neither of them cares for financial well-being, as long as they have enough to make ends meet. Their relationship breaks the boundaries imposed by traditional heteronormative institutions, and by avoiding falling into the traps set by concerns about career, marriage and pregnancy, they are allowed to develop their selves more freely. If anything, real-world problems are mentioned only to highlight their irrelevance.

4.4. A World Signified by Emotion

The shōjo world relies on simulation and emotional signifiers. Resembling the real world, it uses a slight stray from the norm to establish difference. The characters live in an everflowing present that is constantly redefined by an evolution in their emotions.

The Lake is not paced linearly, being filled with sidetracks and triggered memories, and the reader never knows exactly how much time has passed within the plot, what year it is, or any exact locations – the characters themselves have a hard time keeping track of time, and locations often seem to exist only in memory or temporarily.

When things get really bad, you take comfort in the *placeness* of a place.
(Yoshimoto 8)

[We] never talked about preparations or plans, even dreams. We just kept going on as we were, here and now. The two of us, on location. (53)

Here, time didn't exist. We were cut off from rest of the world. Just being with Nakajima made me feel as if we were detached from history, and had no particular age. . . .

Time has stopped, and I'm looking at Nakajima, and that's all I want. (25)
Space and time are defined by establishing moments of intimacy and relevant events. The relationship between Nakajima and Chihiro is in the everflowing present of the shōjo world, emanating nostalgia even though it is on-going; often, it seems that the only real place in the world is Chihiro's apartment, when they are there together.

There are talks of time passing and deadlines related to aspects of 'the real world', such as Nakajima's university exams or Chihiro's job. The linear passage of time is seen as parallel to the one established by their relationship. Jobs and exams belong to reality, but the world of their romance is hyperreal. Its temporal development is measured in everyday interaction and frozen by the occasional conflict or development.

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From the beginning of the novel, Chihiro knows that Nakajima has had a traumatic experience in the past, though he was not ready to talk about it – the reader is informed by the book excerpt that it is related to Aum Shinrikyo. As Chihiro eventually discovers, he was kidnapped and brainwashed by 'a cult', whose name and characteristics are not really divulged. In the shōjo world, what matters is the emotions related to the events, not their real-life counterparts. The only thing that is real in the novel is Nakajima's involvement.

Trauma affects time and prevents people from moving forward. Time is described as 'stopped' for the children kidnapped and brainwashed by the cult (149). Because of this, their existence seems surreal to the world around them.

For some reason, somewhere in the back of my mind I'd thought that as soon as I started working on the mural, he would vanish.

Sometimes I'd have a dream like that, and I'd wake up with my heart racing, bolting upright on my futon. Tears would be streaming down my cheeks—even I was startled. I had come home to find that Nakajima was gone, along with all his stuff. I rushed to the window, hurriedly slid it open, and looked out, but his window was dark. There was nothing to indicate that Nakajima had ever existed. To think that it was all over, so soon ... That was how the dream went.

Each time I had it, I realized again that it could happen at any time. (102)

Healing Nakajima means bringing him to Chihiro's timeline. While they enjoy the present together, it is ephemeral as long as they cannot walk towards the future at the same pace. They can become a family and exist together as a permanent entity only once the healing process is complete. Having dinner together, sleeping in the same house, talking, and sharing each other's feelings, they slowly manage to breach through this obstacle.

For the time being, let's go back home and I'll make us some tea with some really good water. (188)

The last line of the novel sees them going back together to Chihiro's place, having solved the mystery of Nakajima's past and started the way towards recovery. Here, the everflowing present is abandoned in favour of a realistic near future.

5. Conclusion

Shōjo is a cultural phenomenon employing multiple mediums which are reproduced within a closed cycle, with a history of subversion. Expressed in signifiers and emotions, it exists as a hyperreal subculture that constantly attempts to redefine socially constructed notions of gender, family and relationships by constructing a 'third gender'. Its protagonists are young girls discovering the world around them via emotional experimentation. Its romance is based on familiarity and understanding, rather than on heterosexist tropes. Its time and space are everflowing, yet ever familiar, using emotional signifiers as reference points. Shōjo is not just a genre of manga, but a culture with its own worldview, and its own *écriture*. Yoshimoto is a writer that has taken on this *écriture* and helped it evolve to the next level.

The Lake takes on seminal aspects of Yoshimoto's work: the shōjo protagonist, the non-masculine love interest, the ersatz family built by emotional bonds, and mutual healing. It is not the romantic love story that Western literary tradition relies on, where passionate connections must struggle with external factors in order for characters to live happily ever after. Rather, it is a story of two individuals who are looking for a place of their own, where their broken selves can heal together. There is no knight on a white stallion to save Chihiro; rather, Chihiro *is* the knight, as she guides Nakajima towards a safe place.

The Lake is one of many works in shōjo culture's repertoire. By reproducing a world defined by emotional signifiers, it continues the shōjo tradition of exploring the depths of human relationships and emotions, and seeking new ways of expressing them.

As more works are added to shōjo culture's repertoire, its écriture can reach out to a wider audience and assure its cycle of production by drawing in new members to its world.

Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive history regarding the Orientalist reception of Yoshimoto's works in the West, see the Introduction and Chapter 2 of Haga.

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