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## When No Means Yes: BDSM, Body Modification, and Japanese Womanhood as Monstrosity in *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris*

### Abstract

This paper explores the representation of female monstrosity which are relied upon by two female Japanese writers to illustrate modern Japanese women's process of reclaiming power. Hitomi Kanehara in *Snakes and Earrings* and Yōko Ogawa in *Hotel Iris* depict women involved in BDSM relationships which shape how their characters are seen, how they view themselves, and how they develop their consciousness of the world. Although the female protagonists of each novel are presented in a submissive role to their male counterparts, they nonetheless embrace their passivity in order to reclaim their own unique sense of empowerment. BDSM is represented as warping the body in both novels. Through this warping, the women are able to negotiate spaces for themselves where they can derive their own pleasure from the supposed passive positions. *Snakes and Earrings* overlays BDSM with practices of body modifications in order to portray the changing attitudes toward female subjectivity in modern Japan. In *Hotel Iris*, traditional values involving familial authority clash with the sexual awakening of it's female protagonist as she navigates the socio-cultural stigma attached with acting outside what is considered normal. Through the analyses of both novels this paper highlights the changing conception of female sexuality and sexual practices in modern Japan. These changing conceptions speak to the evolution of female subjectivity and the gendered wrrestling of power through sexual activity.

### Keywords

Japan, Sexuality, Modification, Monstrosity, BDSM

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The cliché of Japan as a land of contrasts, especially as it pertains to the Traditional and the Modern, has repercussions for the construction and maintenance of gender ideologies and sexual relations. Part of Japan's traditionalism is comprised of deeply ingrained patriarchal structures as well as taboo sexual practices, which serve to sublimate the expression of female desire. However, the novels being examined in this paper reconceptualize preconceptions of what constitutes appropriate female desire and sexual expectations of women through an evocation of monstrous sexuality. In *Snakes and Earrings* (2005) by Hitomi Kanehara and *Hotel Iris* (2010) by Yōko Ogawa, the traditional values of Japan compete with its own modern sexual values which—in emphasizing images of monstrous desire—deviate from tradition and orient the status of the woman away from one of subservience toward one of affirmation.

Each novel written by Japanese women, who focus on the experiences of Japanese female protagonists, draws attention to the changing representations of female sexuality and subjectivity. Kanehara and Ogawa push the limits of aggressions enacted on the female body as a way of negating the passivity traditionally assumed of women. Through descriptions of welcomed BDSM practices and sought-after body modifications by the female protagonists, the female writers challenge binaries of active and passive subjects, call into question how agency is defined, and—significantly—question who actually holds power. Although post-war Japan maintain the social, ideological, and literary remnants of patriarchal criticism in contemporary Japanese writings, *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris* portray a counter-discursive reimagination of Japanese women, which allows readers to rethink previously held assumptions about female sexuality, sexual agency, and gender conformity.

In *Snakes and Earrings* Kanehara explores the incongruous relationship between love and violence with emphasis on the impact of male power inflicted on the female body. The female protagonist, nineteen-year-old Lui Nakazawa, becomes romantically involved with Ama, the Snakeman, who is nicknamed as such for having a forked tongue. When Ama takes Lui to the punk shop, Desire, to have her tongue pierced—because she also wants a forked tongue—she meets Shiba-san, the owner of the shop. Lui is immediately enthralled by Shiba-san which sets a tenuous love triangle in motion. As her visits to Desire become more frequent, she becomes sexually involved with Shiba-san whose sadism is encouraged by Lui. However, when Ama suddenly dies and Lui finds out that the murderer was Shiba-san, she decides to stay with Shiba-san because they have been equally at fault for Ama's death.

From the beginning of the story, Kanehara evokes sexual monstrosity through the emphasis on body modification. Three examples of body modification—Ama's forked tongue, Lui's tongue piercing done with Shiba-san's hands, and her subsequent tattoo—function as avenues for the expression of her sexual energy. In all three cases, the novel depicts an emphasis on bodily modifications and the satisfaction of desire. During an interview with Norimitsu Onishi (2004), Kanehara discusses her characters as "people who don't expect anything from society, that's why they are looking inward or to the people closest to them." *Snakes and Earrings* explores Lui's fatal obsession with altering her body, which is interwoven with her sexual obsession. As Ama, the Snakeman, discusses the procedure for getting a forked tongue, Lui watches and is "transfixed" by the way he "skillfully grasped his cigarette in the crux of the 'V'" (Kanehara 2005, 1). The act of placing the cigarette, a phallic symbol, within the "V", a yonic symbol, establishes the novel's overarching theme of pervasive sexuality. Lui and Ama become attracted to each other through the shared fetishization of body modification. Lui admits she "was addicted to stretching" and realizes that "he seemed to be enjoying himself" (4) as he talked about the pierce-and-tie process of splitting the tongue. Even as she recalls the day they first met, she remembers being "mesmerized by his slim, serpentine tongue" despite not fully understanding why it attracted her so much (15). Her description of her tongue piercing equates the procedure with sexual pleasure, at one point even providing a greater sensation than sex itself:

The next moment there was a clamping sound, and shivers much greater than those of an orgasm shot through my entire body. Goose bumps shot up my arms, and my body went into a slight spasm. My stomach tightened and for some reason so did my crotch, where I felt an ecstatic, tingling sensation (9-10).

The blurred line separating pleasure and pain is emphasized through Lui's commitment to altering her physical appearance. Lui's ability to convert pain into a pleasurable experience rewrites the narrative of women as physically weak, culturally subservient, and sexually modest.

To contrast Lui's sexual deviation, her friend Maki is described as "the epitome of the Barbie-girl" (19). The Barbie-girl metaphor introduces conservative femininity, which Lui conscientiously attempts to resist. Lui is aware of the incompatibility between a tongue stud, a camisole dress, and blond curls (19); however, she never had aspirations to be the perfect woman. Her resistance to the 'Barbie-doll syndrome' is Kanehara's way of exploring modern versions of the Japanese woman. Unlike Maki who

“think[s] tattoos can be cute” if it was “a little butterfly or rose” (19), Lui isn’t interested in the “cutesy stuff” (20). Lui thinks of getting tattoos of “dragons, tribal patterns, or ukiyoe woodblock prints” (20): images that are considered unsuitable for a Barbie-girl. When Lui gets called by the manager to work her part-time job at a companion party, she decides on her own terms how much of a stereotypical woman she will be. Kanehara’s exploration of the freeter, that is “someone who just picks up temp jobs here and there” (81), highlights Lui and girls like her as part of the growing modern phenomenon of Japanese women who are content to earn money doing unskilled work. Lui is comfortable with playing the role of a ‘respectable’ woman all the while knowing that she will never allow herself to become a Barbie-girl. She understands and exploits male desire, which makes her content in “playing the part of a pleasant, polite Japanese girl and receiving quite a handful of business cards” (56). Lui willingly sells her sex. However, she isn’t misled by the commodification of her body, noting that “it wasn’t really me they were giving the cards to. They were giving them to some character I played the part of just for the occasion” (56). Being a companion girl is one way through which Lui extends the capabilities of her sexualized body. When she visits Shiba-san to view designs for her tattoo, she uses her body for a more overt kind of exchange.

Shiba-san facilitates Lui’s body modification and her subsequent spiral into an addiction toward self-harm. According to Victoria Pitts (2003, 50), body modifications operate “as expressions of agency that potentially work against relations of power that oppress women.” Pitts goes on to say however, that such modifications may also “fail to reclaim the female body.” This conflicted outcome is represented by Kanehara. Where *Snakes and Earring* breaks the traditional representation of the Japanese woman as docile and reserved, Shiba-san’s exercise of power over Lui’s body reinforces stereotypes of women as being controlled by male desire. As with the tongue piercing, rendered in sexual imagery, Shiba-san’s tattoo design evokes a sexual response in Lui. She prostitutes her body for a tattoo. Whether it is because she has no money, or because she is sexually attracted to Shiba-san (the fact that she is a freeter would suggest the former), she agrees to have sex with him in order to pay for the tattoo—which will combine Ama’s dragon design with Shiba-san’s Kirin design. As much as she is drawn to Shiba-san’s artistry, she is drawn to his sadistic dominance. Before he climaxes, Lui notes that he said “Here it comes” in “the [same] way he had when he pierced my tongue” (Kanehara 2005, 39). Again, the pleasure in pain experience is emphasized as well as the equation of her body modification with an orgasmic experience.

The first sexual meeting between the two sets in motion their sadomasochistic relationship which ultimately leads Lui to become further estranged from her friends, Ama, and her own self. In the events starting with Lui's visit to Shiba-san, through the details of their sexual encounter, and ending with Lui's disdain for the child, Kanehara highlights the aimlessness of disinterested women such as Lui. Casual sex, body modifications, and a rejection of family values characterize the representation of modern Japanese women in *Snakes and Earrings*, whom Lui is meant to symbolize. The stereotype of women as being naturally maternal is overturned in *Snakes and Earrings*. Lui isn't just the anti-thesis to a Barbie-girl, she is also opposed to bearing children, or even being around them.

Preoccupied with the outer changes: the tongue piercing and then the tattoo, Lui neglects her health and the changes it causes inside her. Her impatience with the length of time required for the body modification highlights her addiction to the pleasurable pain it brings and a desire to have shock appeal. The way she wants her dragon-Kirin tattoo—without eyes—is a reinforcement of her non-conformity which continues to push the limits of what is considered acceptable for a woman in Japan. As the ink spreads over her body, and as the hole in Lui's tongue moves from a 10g through to a 6g, her mind becomes increasingly dispassionate. It produces sensual changes, which in turn stir explosive emotions: "On every day where I'd moved up to a bigger stud, I found I couldn't even taste anything for the rest of the day. The constant pain also made me irritable and made me wish everybody would just die" (80).

Kanehara describes Lui's rushed desire to have the forked tongue—and by extension to desperately belong to a subculture—as encouraging self-harm among Japanese girls. Lui's self-harm leads to her becoming anorexic. As her anorexia worsens the impact of Shiba-san's sadism becomes painful without the pleasure leading Lui to say "I felt as if his fingers were getting rougher each and every time we had sex. It was probably a sign of his passion" (92). The warped sense of romanticism accepted by Lui as a way of rationalizing Shiba-san's sexual aggression carries over to her consideration of marriage put forward by him. Shiba-san points out to her that she looks "sickly thin and totally pale" and "stink[s] of alcohol" (88). As she continues to stretch her tongue hole to a 4g, eating becomes a painful experience, not the pleasurable kind of pain that the piercing or the tattoo brought. Her resort to alcoholism for sustenance as well as to pass the time leads to a bodily modification she had not intended.

Kanehara uses animal imagery to highlight Lui's sickly physique which "looked like a crane fly" (88) and further draws attention to the warped Japanese female body when Lui admits: "I couldn't believe how grotesque I looked" (88). Lui's body modification—intentional and unintentional—creates an outward impression of her internal desolation. As Laura Miller (2006, 27) discusses, the "displacement of identity onto the body surface" in *Snakes and Earrings* highlights the damage done to Lui's internal and external capacity. Despite her frail body, she still submits to Shiba-san because his poking and prodding made her "grimace with pain and with pleasure" (Kanehara 2005, 89). She goes on to say that "the only feeling with the power to kick me back to life was the feeling of acute pain" (90). After another sexual encounter with Shiba-san, she returns home and inserts the 2g tongue stud as "blood started to run out straight away" (92). Her commitment to having a forked tongue maintains her addiction to pain which is necessary to remind her that she is in fact alive, despite feeling dead inside. By dramatizing the extent of pain Lui willingly endures to the point of self-harm, Kanehara evolves an understanding of the Japanese woman beyond notions of the female as naturally weak. The grotesque image of Lui suffering from fecal impaction highlights the mutation of her bodily functions which bears on the overall concept of body modification.

Through Kanehara's evocation of monstrosity to explore changing conceptions of the female body, Lui's body modification leads her to a nihilistic view of existence. In the words of Ryu Murakami (2000) in his essay "Japan's Lost Generation," Lui undergoes "hikikomori," a type of social withdrawal characteristic of Japan's lost decade. Lui's *hikikomori* comes as a result of her exasperation with life. Her rushed promotion to each smaller gauge parallels her gradual disenchantment with having a purpose in life. Early in the novel, although her focus is on completing the tattoo and finally having a forked tongue, she thinks of how her life had "no real possessions, no emotional ties, no hatred" (78). Her indifference toward these things makes her feel that "my tattoo, my forked tongue, my future, were all empty of meaning" (78). Lui, Ama, and Shiba-san epitomize a modern version of post-war Japan's lost generation. The passing reference to the "brain-dead variety shows and comatose documentaries" (45) Lui finds on TV emphasize the far-reaching scope of the present-day aimlessness. When Lui opens the newspaper she says, "all I really got out of it was that people were being murdered every day here in Japan, and that even the sex trade was feeling the pinch of the recession" (46). It is one of the very few indications given by Kanehara of a world outside of Lui's life. However, it is significant enough to parallel the protago-

nist's disenchantment with living. The minor detail of a country plagued with socio-economic issues calls to mind Hideo Kobayashi's description of a lost attachment to the city. In his essay, "Literature of the Lost Home" Kobayashi (1995, 54) discusses the "Japanese spirit" and being overcome with spiritual exhaustion. In *Snakes and Earrings*, spiritual exhaustion takes place alongside a general exhaustion with living experienced by youth culture. The novel's focalization on Lui layers the experience of disorientation with a woman's control over her body, regardless of how dire the consequences. Especially as it relates to her body modification, *Snakes and Earrings* echoes Yumiko Iida's (2002, 232) claim of abandoning inner depth in order to "feel better about oneself by simple altering, for example, one's body shape or appearance by piercing, dying, or tattooing." When Lui reaches the "0g milestone" (Kanehara, 99), albeit without Ama to feel proud of her 'achievement', she realizes that she was "living a boring existence without Ama. A monotonous, sexless life" (108). The dependence on Ama to give her life purpose denies the level of independence Lui prides herself on having. Without the pain from the tattoos, piercing, and sex, Lui only has the loss of Ama to remind her that she is alive.

Kanehara moves beyond the physical effects of body modification, that is the outward changes inflicted on the body, to the mental effects of modifying the body, summed up by Lui's exhaustion with living. Her failure to find a new addiction leads her to believe that "no matter what I did, I always ended up feeling low" (81-82). Kanehara's vision of a dreary Japanese reality offers little room for her characters to imagine possibility away from the ennui of existence. Ultimately, Lui's nihilism goes beyond the simple interpretation of her actions argued by Mark Driscoll (2007, 182) who believes that Lui's primary concern is to locate new modes of sensation that will lift her out of a generalized post-bubble anomie." While Lui searches for new modes of sensation, it is not for the purpose of lifting her out of her anomie because, as Kanehara shows, escape is futile. By drawing attention to the psycho-somatic effects of body modification, for the most part enacted by a woman on her own body, Kanehara highlights the extreme effects on the body. The body modifications of the forked tongue and tattoo together with her masochism are the main ways through which Lui proves how strong she is.

The sadomasochistic relationship between her and Shiba-san is facilitated on her terms. During her first visit to Desire to get her tongue pierced, she says of Shiba-san, "I couldn't suppress my desire to let him do with me whatever he wanted" (13). If the sadist in Shiba-san is meant to portray the

aggressive masculinity meted out to women, Kanehara balances the relationship by having a female character derive pleasure from the aggression, depicted most notably in her willed painful experience of having a forked tongue but also in her masochism. Lui's resolve to endure marriage with Shiba-san extends her masochistic craving to be punished. It directs attention toward a determined female subject who willingly challenges the machismo of men like Ama and Shiba-san. Although *Snakes and Earrings* portray the self-destructive effects of body modification, the novel also highlights the ways in which a particular woman in postwar Japan takes control of her body and owns her sexuality in ways that absorb the male gaze and deflect patriarchal structures that attempt to confine a woman's desire.

In the same way that *Snakes and Earrings* emphasizes pleasurable pain as an important element in the way modern Japanese women challenge the patriarchal tradition, *Hotel Iris* explores a young woman's immersion in the pleasures of bondage and dominance (B&D) as crucial to not only her sexual enlightenment but also her resistance of filial piety. Both novels rely on non-normative sexual relationships to re-imagine the modern Japanese woman as deviant, not conventional, and weak. Where, in *Snakes and Earrings*, S&M was Lui's way of negotiating sexual dynamics on her terms, Yōko Ogawa layers a young woman's maturation with a sexual relationship that is seemingly destructive yet liberating in a way. Through B&D practices Mari is able to escape the confines placed on her by her mother, and the wider society—inclusive of its gender expectations and what it deems 'normal' sexual behavior.

Unlike the challenge to male aggression highlighted in *Snakes and Earrings*, *Hotel Iris* challenges Confucian ideas of duty toward one's parents. Ogawa portrays the sexual awakening of the seventeen-year-old female protagonist, Mari, whose consciousness of her subservience is aroused and simultaneously maintained in her relationship with the translator of the Russian romance novel, which coincidentally happens to have a female protagonist called Marie. As Mari becomes increasingly involved with the translator, she abandons her job as an unpaid concierge at her mother's hotel. When the translator's nephew visits him, Mari learns a dark secret the translator had been hiding. Her curiosity depends her insatiable desire for his companionship, which ultimately comes at a cost to his life. The novel ends with the translator's death and a void left in Mari's life.

As with the start of *Snakes and Earrings*, there is an evocation of monstrosity from the beginning of *Hotel Iris*. The monster under scrutiny is described as a "filthy pervert" (1), "disgusting old man," "scumbag" and an "im-



potent bastard" (2). He is the one who would later be known as 'the translator'. At first, the translator is described as a man "past middle age, on the verge of being old" (4). The imprecise age given at the beginning of the novel is indicative of the air of mystery surrounding him early on. Only late in the novel does Mari point out that "the fifty-year difference in our ages. You couldn't call it normal" (136). Additionally, he is only mentioned as 'the translator' due to the nature of his job, which further heightens his mysteriousness because he remains unnamed. The accusations are thrown by a prostitute who says that even he is "not fit to be with a woman like me" (2). Through the establishment of a boundary demarcating acceptable sexual practices, the monstrosity of the translator's sexual demands is emphasized.

Mari is immediately drawn to the accused because of his composure and a voice that was "powerful and deep [...] like a hypnotic note from a cello or a horn" (3). Her childlike curiosity feeds her newfound desire for the translator's perversion. The first indication of Mari's innocence waning comes when she tries to mimic his dominant aggression. She says, "the word 'whore' was somehow appealing. 'Shut up, whore' I tried repeating it to myself, hoping I might hear him say the word again" (4). Uttering the word 'whore' to herself because it brings a certain appeal foreshadows one of the reasons why she submits herself to the translator. He awakens a grotesque image of herself that she finds strangely attractive. Throughout the story she is seduced into accepting the monstrous version of herself induced by the sexual assertiveness of the translator. In the introductory scene to the novel, the translator's enticing vulgarity is used by Ogawa to tempt Mari into discovering more about herself as well as the nature of sexual relationships, of which she has no experience.

In *Hotel Iris* Mari is confronted with two projections of herself produced by her mother and the translator: the sheltered virgin and the shunned whore. In both cases she is objectified and made peripheral, while the adults in her life are central. Her mother and the translator, who treat her like a virgin and a whore respectively, define her by producing a one-sided description of her to which she is expected to conform. Her mother attempts to exercise control over her sexuality by exploiting her innocence for monetary gain. When a drunk guest accidentally touches Mari's breast, her mother tells her "If we play our cards right, we might even get a little something out of him tomorrow" (72). In the same way that Kanehara directs attention to the commodification of the female body with Lui's role as a companion girl, Ogawa highlights a similar act of commodification though in this case encouraged by an older woman, who extorts money from guests by pimping

her daughter. Lui and Mari learn to use their bodies as mechanisms for the assertion of their agency. The art of manipulation that Mari learns is used to keep her affair with the translator a secret. She pretends to be the deceptively innocent child her mother wants her to be in the same way that Lui pretends to be a Barbie-girl for the wealthy business men seeking companionship. However, the creative deception does not guarantee Mari immunity from punishment.

The mother and translator both inflict punishment on Mari though for different purposes, which in return yield different reactions by Mari. To dramatize the tensions between Mari's relationship between her mother and the translator, *Hotel Iris* draws attention to the contrast between the frustration of *kyōiku mama* and the pleasure of *enjo kōsai*. Where Anne Allison (1996) discusses the negative side of the *kyōiku mama* which involves a "condemning mother who relentlessly police[s] their children's study habits" (136), *Hotel Iris* portrays Mari's mother as increasingly impinging on her freedom to move around. Her mother's punishment is intended to correct her behavior, while the translator's punishment is intended to provide pleasure, which by the end of the novel awakens her sense of self, her sex, and people around her. The transactional nature of the relationship, *enjo kōsai*, between the translator and Mari—his sexual experience for her companionship—echoes Lui's work as a companion girl. In *Hotel Iris*, Mari gains a sexual awareness of herself, which is relied upon to challenge the relationship with her mother. For each kind of punishment dealt to her by her mother, there is an experience with the translator that counters her mother's attempts at control. Describing the ritualistic grooming of Mari's hair which turns into a disciplinary exercise, Ogawa highlights the extent of matriarchal control over a younger woman's body:

She still does my hair every morning. She sits me down at the dressing table and takes hold of my ponytail, forcing me to keep very still [...] if I move my head even the least bit, she tightens her grip (16).

The mother's aggression toward controlling Mari's hairstyle will later be matched by the translator whose sexual aggression provides a different pain, a pleasurable kind she had not yet experienced.

She is subservient to the pleasure induced by the translator, but not the subservience of labor demanded by her mother. However, unlike the orders which she wants the translator to give her, she finds her mother's orders bothersome. After hearing the translator shout the word 'whore', Mari is

drawn to his “beautiful voice” (4) which she prays will “someday give me an order, too” (42). The appeal of the translator’s orders contrasts with the annoyance caused by the orders of her mother, which she says always made me miserable” because it “robbed me of any happiness” (73). Through the illustration of her hairstyle, Ogawa portrays the contrasting ways in which Mari’s mother and the translator establish her innocence. During their first encounter, she describes how the translator “grabbed my hair and dragged me to the couch” (54). His aggressive treatment of Mari’s hair matches the aggression of her mother, who she says “pulled so hard on my hair that my eyes watered, but it didn’t hurt at all” (57). While similar acts of aggression are asserted through the control of Mari’s hair, the fact that it doesn’t hurt when her mother pulls it implies Mari does not allow her mother to have the kind of power over her that she surrenders to the translator.

The mother’s withholding of Mari’s dinner as punishment is a further act of violence against the body. However, as Mari is sent to bed with an empty stomach, she converts the painful situation into a pleasurable sensation by “tracing the shape of the man’s [the translator’s] back and ear over and over in my mind” (16). Through involvement with the translator, she is able to deny the matriarchal control which binds her to the hotel. She extends her learned submission through B&D to her duty as concierge. Thus, even as she notes that “there seemed no end” to the guests’ orders, she “felt it was important to be quiet” and therefore “tended to them all without a word” (59). The rebelliousness learned from her pleasurable challenge to B&D submission trickles into her creative defiance of her mother’s demands. She goes along with her mother’s demands in order to maintain an image of naiveté which in turn allows her to preserve her secret.

The cyclic process of the mother carefully styling Mari’s hair only to have it disheveled later by the translator reverts the innocent image created by the mother. As the translator dominates her body, she says “Mother’s neat bun fell in my face, the pins sticking out here and there” (54). When the translator cuts off her hair as punishment for having sex with his nephew it signals another example of control enacted on Mari’s body—specifically the ownership of her hair. Even when her hair grows back, she notes that “Mother no longer insisted on putting it up for me” (163). The psychological maturation of being in a relationship corresponds to her physical change of now being in control of her hair. When the translator dies, she says “I didn’t return to my duties behind the front desk” (163). Prior to meeting the translator, Mari had been confined to the hotel. When the translator dies, she knows that she can never return to a life that revolves around maintaining

her duty to her mother and therefore does not resume her hidden position behind the hotel desk. Like Lui, who becomes disenchanted with living, Mari is socially withdrawn after the translator's death.

Mari's escape from Hotel Iris toward the city, her movement within the city, and away from the city toward the island where the translator lives, is a quest for her liberation. Her escape to the translator's house leads to her involvement in a B&D relationship with him, which allows her to relinquish the tension built up as a result of the frustration with working at the hotel. She says of the translator, "On the island, he could do what he wanted with my body, and my soul" (92). Mirroring the ambiguity of her virgin-whore split self, the translator's house contains the duality of her freedom as well as her degeneration. The translator's room offers Mari a private space which allows her to escape the monotony of her duty in the public space of the hotel. His room functions in the same way as Shiba-san's tattoo parlor, appropriately named Desire because it is where Lui is able to act out her masochistic fantasies. Both novels portray women who need private spaces to fulfil their secret and for the most part taboo desires.

Through Mari's participation in B&D activity she not only matures physically but also mentally. While her emotions surrounding what she calls the "discovery of my secret desire" (43) are first conflicted because she is confused and ashamed, she eventually accepts her secret desire because it gives her the space and freedom to escape other limits placed on her, mainly by her mother. After her first sexual encounter, she describes herself as "completely changed" (52) partly because the pleasure derived from parts of her body, which she didn't know could produce pleasure, gives her a deeper awareness of her existence. She says, "I felt I was learning for the first time that I had shoulder blades and temples, ankles and earlobes and an anus" (52). Her awareness of her body comes as a result of its manipulation at the hands of the translator. In a similar way, the translator expresses how he relies on sex, "the desires of the flesh [to] confirm my existence" (66). The reliance on physical pleasure to confirm his existence recalls the way Lui immerses herself in meaningless sex in order to ease the ennui of her life. In both novels, Lui, Mari, and the translator pursue sexual relationships in an attempt to recover human contact and awareness of their humanity. However, they soon discover that sex alone is insufficient for restoring their human connection.

The grotesque detail used to describe each woman's altered bodies exaggerates the extent of male desire expressed through aggression in order to draw attention to old patriarchal structures, which have not changed but

instead mutated. At the end of each novel, although both women have developed maturity and independence, the plots indicate that the subservient status handed to women is damaging and demoralizing to their bodies. Thus, Mari's sexual awakening through B&D makes her dependent on that particular type of sexual practice to maintain her challenge to the status quo because "each new act had been reborn as something different" (84). The translator contorts her body into something she doesn't recognize, which appeals to her thirst for an altered version of herself which is radically different to her perceived innocence. The translator transfers his monstrosity to Mari. The image of herself is strangely appealing to her however, because it challenges her to step out of her innocence. The images of monstrosity are expressed through animal imagery. As she stares at the reflection of her "ugly body draped over the couch", she says she "looked like a dying insect, like a chicken trussed up in a butcher's storeroom" (55). The translator's sexual aggression is bestial in the sense of him being savage. He also evokes a bestial transformation of Mari, which she expresses through descriptions of animals in distress. In addition to the monstrosity of the translator's desire, Ogawa brings together the tightly woven strands of sex and death. Mari's description of her body dying through sex echoes a freeing of the body through orgasmic release. References to death will later act as a means of foreshadowing the death of the translator, who dies as a result of running away from the consequences of his sexual relationship with Mari.

*Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris* depict men and women being corroded by sexual indulgence even as they try to survive the chaos of their desolation. In doing so, each novel shares features of Japanese postwar writing by emphasizing pleasures of the physical body to overcome the oppression by the national body, which takes the form of ideological and socio-cultural oppression. The postwar sensibility places the female body under strain, but—as each novel highlights—it is far more dangerous to the male body. Whereas the men of the novels become cautionary tales through their death—Ama in *Snakes and Earrings* and the translator in *Hotel Iris*—the female protagonists, who played the submissive role in their BDSM relationships, learn to survive with experience and understanding of how to derive pleasure from pain. Kanehara and Ogawa destabilize stereotyped gender roles by having Lui and Mari simultaneously possess traditional characteristics associated with masculinity and oppose pre-assumptions of how femininity ought to be portrayed. As such, in both novels, Lui and Mari develop attributes of decisiveness and callousness that stand in contrast to a nurturing and docile role which women are expected to fulfil. Through the con-

trasting fates of men and women in each novel, Kanehara and Ogawa suggest that the female body resists the violence of the male gaze and becomes a site for liberation, however limited that liberation may actually be. While Lui and Mari, like Ama and the translator, turn to sex in order to fill their existential dread, the men ultimately suffer the most. Both Ama and the translator die in their respective novels. Although Shiba-san remains alive, he becomes self-alienated following the torture and murder of Ama.

Both novels focus on the ways in which their female protagonists negotiate bodily pleasure toward eventually finding their voice. The body acts as an important site for messages involving physical and conceptual issues that deny women a significant voice in relation to male counterparts. The focus on the discourses of the body in *Snakes and Earrings* and *Hotel Iris* makes visible the ways in which the body has been used in the production and maintenance of power relations. The emphasis on the physical effects of aggressive BDSM in both novels, does not appeal to the adoption of an aggressive identity in women to match that of men. Each novel does not propose a way for women's reclamation of a modern Japanese female subjectivity and centrality of a woman's place in a patriarchal society. Lui and Mari are not models for empowering modern Japanese women. Both are involved in BDSM relationships with men, who represent the structures of patriarchal power in modern Japan. The women of both stories, far from fulfilling a romantic ideal of escape and self-empowerment, remain sexual objects in the eyes of men. However, by appropriating aspects of gender-based power structures and by twisting them, at times collapsing them, and especially by exaggerating them, both writers make obvious the grotesque, outrageous, and actual dangers to women that are glossed over by political narratives of power paradigms. The focus on the bodily infliction of gender-based power on women results in the enactment of violent sexual activities. This is the intention of both writers. By taking conceptual ideas of gendered politics, those that are difficult to see, and placing them in the physical realm, what can be perceived with the eye, the writers expose the violence to women's bodies that stem from the maintenance of gendered power structures.

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