"We need to imagine a new kind of woman": Narrating Identity in Postwar Women's Magazines in Japan, 1945-1955

Jana Aresin

The end of World War II and Japan's surrender initiated a reexamination of various identities: Japan's national identity on the world stage, but also identities of race, class, and gender. Widespread destruction and the delegitimization of power structures, followed by social, political, and economic reforms that developed in unequal, yet complex, exchanges between the Allied occupation forces, local political elites, and popular organizations, disrupted and called for a redefinition of social and political relations (Miller 5–6; 39–40). Even though these changes were rarely complete, and some only temporary and quickly reversed, the occupation period can still be considered a decisive moment of uncertainty and possibility that marked the transition from imperial Japan to a democratic capitalist US-ally in the Cold War (Dower 23–24). Therefore, it is productive to examine this moment of transition to understand which social and political changes were initiated, delayed, or stifled and which political and ideological dynamics were responsible for them.

One of the social relations challenged during the occupation period were gender relations, along with the appropriate roles and responsibilities of men and women in the 'new democratic Japan' which the occupation forces planned to construct out of the ruins of the war-torn country (Koikari 20–22). In this essay, I analyze the discourse surrounding the situation and the rights of women through the medium

of women's magazines, in a moment when women had to reassess their appropriate position in society, politics, and on the labor market. This raises a number of questions: How were women constituted as an identity category in the first place, with their own interests, concerns, and aims? Which ideas about womanhood were constructed and circulated within mass media? And finally, how did they collide and intersect with other identity categories such as worker, activist, or member of an ethnic minority?

Much has been written about the medium of women's magazines, with evaluations of the genre ranging from an oppressive tool of heteropatriarchal society to a medium of empowerment and protest (Forster 4–5). What makes women's magazines notable is that they are explicitly gendered in their target audience, connoting their content as being uniquely relevant for 'women' as a social category.[1] At the same time, the structure of many commercial women's magazines, starting from at least the twentieth century, combines a variety of texts, from literary to practical, from entertaining to informative. What most of these texts share is either an explicit aim or an implicit assumption of giving advice and guidance to their readers, particularly about how to 'be a woman' in various contexts—in relationships, on the labor market, at various stages of the life course, within the family, or among friends (Forster 1–2). This prescriptive tone makes women's magazines a particularly interesting medium to study, in order to trace changing discourses, norms and ideals of womanhood and femininity in a society at a given point in time.

Furthermore, women's magazines are a medium with the potential to form and shape collective identities. In his seminal study on nationalism, Benedict Anderson emphasized the rise of literacy and print capitalism as a key factor for the development of national identity (35–36; 46). Similarly, women's magazines can be argued to have played a role in creating a shared 'identity of womanhood.' Barbara Sato asserts that the

1 The target audience does not necessarily correspond to the actual audience. However, the implied audience will usually be obvious to the majority of readers and therefore shape their experience of reading and relating to the text.

rise of mass-produced commercial women's magazines in Japan in the 1920s played an important part in creating a new discourse on womanhood and femininity (78–79). Rising literacy rates and a growing readership, not only among the highest social classes, led to both a standardization in form and a differentiation in themes and topics, as women from different social classes "all forged a place for themselves in their own 'imagined communities'" (Sato 111–112). Sarah Frederick characterizes the increasing popularity of women's magazines as the "emergence of women into public awareness" (3) and argues that the magazines often were the focal point of discussions on 'modernity,' representing both hopes and fears associated with "consumer capitalism, Westernization, and transformation of gender roles" (4). Frederick's analysis pertains to the situation of the interwar period, but, arguably, the same questions resurfaced after the end of World War II when Japanese society was confronted with the democratization policies of the US occupation.

This 'return' of women into public awareness, not just as nationalistic symbols[2] but as a distinct social group, can be understood using Michael Warner's theory of multiple publics and their poetic function of worldmaking (114). Warner argues that the idea of a unified public sphere is ideological and that "it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general and others to be merely personal, private, or particular" (117). He contrasts this 'dominant public' with the concept of 'counterpublics' that are not necessarily subversive or radical in nature but a "space for the circulation of discourse" and "for developing oppositional interpretations of its members' identities, interests, and needs" (119). To a certain degree, women's magazines share characteristics of a counterpublic, as they speak to

2 Ueno Chizuko argues that wartime mobilization of the population accelerated women's integration into the nation state, but that men and women remained segregated in separate spheres (15; 43–44). Tessa Morris-Suzuki describes this process through a discursive separation of the state as "the domain of the male political actor" and the nation as "natural, nurturing bod[y] . . . often incarnated in feminine form" (110). This allowed for an integration of women into nationalist rhetoric without including them as full citizens.

a group largely excluded from the discourse of the dominant public sphere and are concerned with "mak[ing] their embodiment and status at least partly relevant in a public way" (Warner 58).

Literary texts, in the form of short stories and serialized novels, took up a large part of women's magazines in the postwar period. However, even non-literary articles frequently made use of the narrative form. Authors of articles on a variety of topics related their arguments using anecdotes and stories from their own lives, from history or mythology, while other articles recalled the life stories of not only famous women (ranging from current actresses and writers to historical figures) but also 'common' people. Women's magazines were therefore filled with manifold individual stories of how women in the past and present engaged with questions that most readers were likely to have been confronted with: how to deal with the immediate struggles of everyday life and shortages in food, clothes, and housing (Miki 45–46), but also what kind of future to imagine, regarding women's education and work prospects, marriage and family life, and new-found access to the political sphere. By telling stories of conflict and ways to resolve them, the narratives go beyond merely representing women's lives.[3] Instead, they use narrative tropes and retellings of experiences presumably familiar to the readers, to elicit empathy and identification while rearranging, producing, and reproducing those experiences into their own idealized notions of womanhood and femininity.

A survey of women's magazines in the immediate postwar moment shows that there are three main narrative strategies: firstly, a universalist narrative based on a notion of shared qualities that women were assumed to 'naturally' possess; secondly, a collectivist narrative of solidarity that locates women's identity in a shared experience of oppression; and thirdly, an individualist narrative that also emphasizes shared

3 The question of representation and its relation to an ontological reality is its own topic of discussion that considers the position and relation of author, text, reader, and the process of meaning-making that constitutes both our reading of fictive texts and their social surroundings. For a detailed analysis of the debate, see Breger (2017).

experiences but seeks the solution in individual efforts rather than collectivist action.

Universalism and Compassion

The universalist narrative assumes a shared identity of women based on their 'natural' qualities and character, largely leaving out differences of class, race, or sexuality. It is closely tied to the trope of women as being pacifist, kind and caring; and employs motherhood as both symbolic representation and 'rational' explanation for these qualities. An article titled "The Vow of American and Japanese Grieving Mothers"[4] that appeared in the popular magazine *Fujin Kurabu* ('Women's Club') in 1950 contains a conversation between two women from Japan and the United States, both of whom have lost a son in the Pacific War. Rather than seeing each other as enemies or blaming each other for their sons' deaths, they compassionately bond over the shared experience of loss and vow to engage themselves in the peace movement so that "[no] mother throughout the world [will] experience this painful grief" (*Nichibei hibo* 61). The article emphasizes the similarity of both women and their experiences multiple times, particularly in their role as mothers. It is stated that "feelings of mothers are not different in America and Japan," and a sub-heading proclaims that "mothers' hearts are understood throughout the world" (*Nichibei hibo* 64). At the same time, the political activism in the peace movement that both women aspire to is clearly demarcated to be one born out of emotion, casting it in the 'appropriate' field for women's political agency. Yanagiwa Byakuren, one of the two women, asserts at the end of the conversation that she is "not part of the theoretical (*rironha*) or practical school (*jissenha*), but a person who is only following her emotions (*tada kanjō dake de iku kata*)," yet that she still "must raise this prayer of a grieving mother to the mothers of the world" (*Nichibei hibo* 66).

4 All translations from Japanese are my own.

This narrative of a universal experience of woman- and motherhood, and women being by nature opposed to war, was a common element in peace movements of the 1950s, not only in Japan (Goedde 129). The usage of this trope among women activists was based partly in sincere belief and was partly deployed to gain acceptance for their activism through a gendered discourse (Goedde 133–135). The beginning of postwar peace activism in Japan was split between a conservative and a leftist/communist fraction, with the latter using far more politicized rhetoric than that of the 'pacifist mother' (Yamamoto 135–136). However, in 1950, in the aftermath of the US-occupation's anti-communist 'reverse course' and at the beginning of the Korean War, a more conservative rhetoric dominated, as even less radical peace activism was restricted by the occupation forces (Yamamoto 143–144; Sherif 3).

Collectivism and Solidarity

A second narrative emphasizes collectivism and solidarity, as is dominant in left-wing magazines such as *Hataraku Fujin* ('Working Woman') and *Shin Josei* ('New Woman'). Rather than starting from 'women's nature,' these magazines aimed to mobilize identity on the basis of the shared experience of hardship and oppression specific to women. This happened frequently in the form of transnational comparisons, commenting on the situation and activities of (working) women primarily in China, the Soviet Union, and the United States, and occasionally in European countries. Given the magazine's political outlook, this narrative of shared oppression is frequently and unsurprisingly tied to issues of class and a specific identity of women as workers. In an article in *Hataraku Fujin* from 1949, the author laments that, under capitalism, "the livelihood of workers has been threatened, and lower wages, more frequent layoffs, and even more intolerable humiliations have been forced on women, just because they are women" (Matsuda 16). She goes on to refer to working women as the "most oppressed among oppressed people" (Matsuda 17). The proposition for action in this narrative is a more politicized collectivist attitude that emphasizes solidarity and

concrete help and support for fellow (women) workers. Many of these articles simultaneously deconstruct and reinforce essentializing notions of gender. They emphasize the special needs and interests of women but integrate them into a larger narrative of class struggle, as can be seen in a 1947 article by Hani Setsuko, stating that the neglect of women's rights will lead to "never escap[ing] the various forms of hatred and oppression" (Hani 50). Despite the emphasis on women's particular interests, there are also attempts to escape the constraints of rigid ascriptions of femininity or masculinity, calling instead for "a new type of woman" that is neither feminine nor masculine (Hani 51).

This narrative can be placed into the discursive tradition of left-wing internationalism, articulating the fight for rights of specific oppressed groups (based on gender or race) within a framework of class struggle or expressing solidarity for oppressed groups to strengthen support for labor activism. This was a common theme in the "surge of political, creative, and intellectual engagements" (Onishi 107) in early Cold War Japan, which, in addition to left-wing women's groups, also saw movements such as 'Colored Internationalism,' built on notions of Afro-Asian solidarity, and collaboration between *zainichi* Korean[5] activists and Japanese communists in the wake of the Korean War. These solidarity movements constructed race, national identity, and (to a limited degree)[6] gender as identity categories that could be mobilized for activism (Onishi 11–13; Choi 554).

5 At the end of the Pacific War, there were approximately 1.45 million Koreans living in Japan as colonial subjects. The majority left Japan after the war, yet around 600.000 remained, and many more returned after initial repatriation (Caprio and Jia 21). After losing their status as 'Japanese subjects,' these *zainichi* ('resident in Japan') Koreans were effectively stateless until 1965, when Japan and South Korea established diplomatic relations, and Japan officially recognized South Korean citizenship (Ryang 7–9).

6 Onishi points out the heteropatriarchal nature of Afro-Asian solidarity movements that often failed to acknowledge women's claims for political agency (Onishi 12). Nevertheless, leftist women's magazines show discursive strategies for establishing gender as a political category that resemble those aimed at integrating race and national identity into solidarity movements.

Individualism and Recognition

The third narrative of individualism is most present in mainstream commercial women's magazines. It appears in countless articles telling the life stories of famous but also lesser-known women. These stories engage with many of the questions surrounding women's new roles in society, such as navigating education and work, marriage and family life, and personal happiness and fulfillment. Many of the stories recognize the struggles and problems women face in society and seemingly question the official narrative of women's liberation through the US-forces and democratization. However, they rarely connect this to political demands but emphasize women's individual abilities and resilience to achieve success and happiness. One example is an article titled "Sugino Yoshiko's Thirty-year Road of Hardships" from a 1950 issue of *Fujin Kurabu*. The article relates the story of Sugino Yoshiko, a fashion designer, and the manifold obstacles she faced in founding and establishing her own fashion school. Throughout the article, she is described as skilled, intelligent, and having an "extremely determined spirit" (*itatte kachiki*) (Yanagawa 83).

In a story about her childhood, she is quoted as stating that "[i]t is not true that a woman cannot become a remarkable person" (Yanagawa 83). In Yoshiko's individual pursuit of a career and personal fulfillment, she challenges conservative Cold War norms of women as housewives that were taking hold in 1950s Japan, but only to a limited degree. When her husband angrily confronts her about working, despite his more than sufficient salary to care for the family, "even the strong-willed Ms. Yoshiko meekly hung her head" (Yanagawa 84). Even though her husband later gives in to her demands and even gives up a promising career opportunity to support Yoshiko's school, the article closes with the statement that the readers should note "the big role that the married love of Mr. and Mrs. Sugino played" (Yanagawa 86) in the school's success, suggesting that a woman's professional career is only possible in the framework of marriage and with the support of a husband.

What these three narratives have in common is the attempt to create a shared identity for women through personal, historical, and

transnational narratives. The narratives appeal to empathy, compassion, and feelings of solidarity by relating the hardships, fears, and everyday struggles of women in the changing postwar society. By referencing a shared nature, shared experience of oppression, or individual, yet recognizably 'female' life stories, they represent women as a distinct social group with interests, rights, and demands, while offering models of appropriate behavior and life courses in the wake of changing gender norms. In this way, women arguably emerge as actors and voices in the public sphere. However, it is questionable if women's magazines constitute a '*counter*public,' as defined by Warner, at least regarding his narrower definition of counterpublics as being oppositional and self-aware.[7] The magazines are arguably concerned with creating a 'women's public' while simultaneously attempting to integrate it into the dominant public sphere, whose narratives they frequently reference and incorporate. Rather than constituting a counterpublic, I would argue that the narratives present in Japanese postwar women's magazines are attempts to make women legible as a relevant social category and actors within accepted and normalized discourses of the dominant public sphere.

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7 In his analysis of queer counterpublics in particular, Warner emphasizes the experience of stigmatization of the addressed group and the explicit recognition of one's own deviation from the norm within the discourse of the counterpublic (117–118). Despite women's experiences of discrimination, disparagement, and violence, (presumed) heterosexual women seem to be in a different situation, as they are not generally stigmatized on the basis of being women, but rather in response to their resistance to conform to prescribed gender norms.

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