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The Voice of Flowers

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Professor Sheehan who has continually supported my endeavors throughout the research and publication process, as well as acted as a soundboard for all of my one too many ideas. Working with you is always a joy, and I truly appreciate your constant support and encouragement!

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ABSTRACT

The following paper discusses the role of *hanakotoba* (the language of flowers) throughout the works of Yoshiya Nobuko, placing a special emphasis on her most unique work "*Onibi*." This paper begins with a loose discussion of *hanakotoba's* history within Japan, before delving into "*Onibi*" to highlight how the use of flowers in literature creates various readings of a text, as well as provides deeper insights into the author, the true purpose of a text, and the social and historical context that a text was produced in.

KEYWORDS: Japansese Studies, Literature, Language of Flowers, Yoshiya Nobuko, Asian Studies, Women and Gender Studies

"The seeds of Japanese poetry lie in the human heart and grow into leaves of ten thousand words" (Rodd as quot-ed by Amano, 2011, 531)

INTRODUCTION

Flowers are alive for but a few days af-ter they are removed from the ground, yet they are an integral, long-lasting motif throughout people's lives. When a child is born, flowers are delivered from friends and family to its mother. Flowers are sent as "get well soon"s when a child breaks their leg at six. In high school, a young girl is asked out with a bouquet full of promises. At weddings, the bouquet is tossed to de-termine whoever is to be next in line. Finally, when someone is laid to rest, friends and family once again deco-rate them in a layer of petals. While the intricate meanings of every col-or, variety, and season may no longer hold relevance for some as they pe-ruse the grocery store corner, it does not detract from how flowers became a measure of life's checkpoints and a symbolic, delicate way to show one's thoughts and feelings.

In many forms of media, including literature, flowers are often used sym-bolically to mark the growth of life, with attention also paid to their specif-ic meanings as well-- swathed in sym-bolism just as much as any other force of nature. This paper will examine the language of flowers and flowers as symbolism within Japanese literature and culture, while looking specifically at how the meaning of the short story "*Onibi*" by Yoshiya Nobuko is trans-formed depending on what meaning and origin the Aster flower is given.

FLOWERS AS A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In Japan, the introduction of *ikebana* (the art of flower arrangement) and *hanakotoba* (the language of flowers) is closely connected to religions such as Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto and Buddhism alike place a heavy impor-tance on the respect and spiritual el-ements of nature. Shinto emphasizes that all things have energy and spirit, that they are, in a way, living. This is possibly one of the reasons for why the symbolism of flowers and nature alike maintained their place within society and literature. As scholar Da-vis F. Hadland remarks, "take away their landscape, and you take away at once their sense of poetry, and, we may almost add, the floral side of their religion too, for the Japanese worship flowers and trees in a way utterly im-possible to the more prosaic Western-er," (2014, 155). According to Davis, Western culture, at least here in United States, has neglected the once integral language of flowers. Furthermore, one could say that even during the time in which this form of expression was remembered, it was done at a surface level. Within the ideas of Shintoism, some would argue that the meaning attached to a flower is in fact being personified in a way that indicates its energy is literally bestowed onto the recipient. While not every Japanese person is a Shinto-ist, and therefore thinking about floral gifts to such an extent in contemporary times, most everyone would at least understand what being one entailed (Takizawa, 1988, 95).

There is also Buddhism. Buddhism not only encouraged elaborate floral offerings within the temples, but Buddhist concepts, literature, and

art also commonly referenced the lotus flower due to its symbolism; each color was symbolic of a Buddhist trait such a compassion, wisdom, and purity of the mind (Takahashi). Additionally, the life of the lotus flower itself not only represented the path of the Buddha, but the way it grows is often quoted for its literal representation of, "the lot[u] s [springing] from the mud," which is a remark on how to become a Buddha one must rid itself from the earthly limitations and desires (mud) (Lescure, 1895, 269). Furthermore, Japanese society is heavily influenced with Buddhist notions of impermanence or *Mono no Aware* which is loosely used to communicate the acceptance of impermanence (Kato, 1962, 558- 9). In this way, what could be a better object to represent the Japanese concept of *mono no aware* than a flower which has a delicate constitution, a short life which relies upon the forever changing weather and seasons, and is the epitome of blooming and fading beauty?

Despite *hanakotoba's* early foundations within religion, there were also cultural movements including flora that furthered the spread and continuation of practices related to floral symbolism. A specific example of this would be the relationship between the recognized national flowers such as the chrysanthemum (*kiku*) in relation to the Japanese Imperial family or that of the cherry blossoms (sakura) to the commercial and festival world of Japan. Many typically assume that the sakura is the national flower of Japan because it is known worldwide to be associated with Japan and its various festivals featuring the flower. Despite this, there is no official national flower and if there had been, it would be between the *sakura* and the *kiku*; the former symbolizing the general public of Japan, while the latter symbolizes a more official version of Japan as well as its nobility. In fact, originally, the chrysanthemum was brought into Japan by means of Chinese medicine (Hamano 2022). Because of this, it was highly regaled by the Imperial family who thought the flower was able to prolong people's lives and it eventually became symbolic of nobility and is featured on formal seals and currency (Yasushi). Chrysanthemums can also be found in the creation of a traditional doll known as *kiku ningyo*, which is roughly translated to chrysanthemum human shaped doll. These dolls came during a time when other floral arrangement techniques were being employed to create displays at Buddhist temples and alters, which were eventually used to create these dolls or statues of famous people from history or historical entertainment (Hamano 2022). It is still a large event during the autumn months for shrines or gardens to create and display *kiku ningyo dolls* (Hamano 2022). Therefore, due to the continued celebration of festivals based on flowers and their symbolism in connection to the country, as well as their historical roots, *hanakotoba* remains alive and acknowledged in modern Japan.

This leads to the literary importance of *hanakotoba*, and by extension, to Yoshiya Nobuko the author of the short story, "Onibi" which will be analyzed later. As previously mentioned, much of *hanakotoba's* introduction into Japanese society originated from religious and Buddhist texts. Hence, the first inklings of literary usage of *hanakotoba* can generally be narrowed down to those found within Buddhist scriptures like the Lotus Sutra. Jumping a few centuries forward into the Heian period, is when historians begin to see *hanakotoba* take form in the *waka* (poetry) of ancient Japan which had begun to become more popular. *Waka* was used by two different groups, the first of which was the elite scholar class who had been the sole writers of *waka* for the majority of its early history. This is likely because of its correlation with Buddhism and the idea of self-cultivation, which included educating oneself as well as the admiration and respect for nature. In the Heian period, however, people also began to see the inclusion of women using *waka*, transformed into a longer form of prose, specifically amongst courtesans (Keene, 1999, 882). Despite the divide between these two groups, they both used *hanakotoba* in the same way; "the flower... [is] [a] [reflection] his own feelings," supporting the "internalized... view that links the cycle of nature with human emotional life," (Amano, 2011, 532). The purpose of this language can go from a flowery confession of unsatisfying rape, "The cherry blossoms were lovely, but the branch was fragile and the flowers to easily picked," (*The Clear Mirror* as quoted by Keene, 1999, 902) to the personification of one's emotions onto another creature:

"Uki koto wo

As one unhappy

Omoitsuranete

Memory succeeds the next,

Karigane no

The chains of wild geese

Naki koso watare

Cry out as they cross the sky

Aki no yona yona

Night after night in autumn"

and was used to invoke emotions and thoughts into literature without admitting ownership ("On Hearing the Wild Geese Cry" by Oshikochi no Mitsune as written by Keene, 1999, 261). As argued later in this paper, *hanakotoba* is, and was, a means to address social issues, identity and gender phenomena, and religious implications in a nuanced manner; creating a space of safety and anonymity. This became

especially important within the Meiji period and onwards to avoid the possibility of censorship that arose in the Meiji and Showa periods. All that is to say, a flower is never just a flower, and the choice to utilize a gardenia versus a daffodil is never unintentional.

YOSHIYA NONUBKO

Yoshiya Nobuko was born in 1896 and started her career as a writer in 1919 with her first novel "*Two Virgins in the Attic*". In her early years of writing, she was known to publish her works in feminist journals, as well as for writing books targeted towards the younger female generation known as *shojo* manga. The most famous of her works in the modern-day period, is her collection of novels titled *Hana Monogatari* (Flower Tales) which followed independent stories that depicted female relationships among one another. Furthermore, Yoshiya used *hanakotoba* within the titles and as the main imagery and plot device of the stories (Suzuki, 2006, 581). From her writings came many of the frame-works for a budding girls' culture, in-cluding the formation of ideas regard-ing female adolescence and romance during prewar Japan (Suzuki, 2006, 581). While Yoshiya is often credited and praised in today's literary world for her early works including and encouraging same-sex love, as well as her role in creating the prevalent genre of *shojo* manga, her work within *Hana Monogatari* often posed the relation-ships between the characters as inno-cent, fleeting fantasies that served an educational purpose to preheterosex-ual love in order for girls to develop a foundation of love (Suzuki, 2006, 582). One could find the notion of in-nocence and purity that she preaches through her stories to be contradictory to her rumored personal lifestyle. Ad-ditionally, her explanation as to why these relationships should be fostered, as represented in her stories— from far away and full of despair, melancholy, and one-sided love— to be anything but a modern day lesbian icon. Yet, judgment should be withheld as this series is not the one being ana-lyzed in this paper. Regardless, her usage of *hanakotoba* as the guiding motif within her stories lends to high-light the 'fragility' and innocence of the relationships within her novels in a way that much of her audience might hope is to act as a large façade of innocence and purity brought forth only to throw the government and "Good Wife, Wise Mother" sentimentalists off her trail.

In today's paper, the focus is pointed at Yoshiya's most unique work "*Onibi*" which was written in the postwar era of Japan. Not only is "*Onibi*" a story with a seemingly generic theme compared to Yoshiya's typical stories, but it also features a difference in prose compared to her prewar work. This is because the story acts as parody to what a stereotypical Japanese man is or should be at this time. Furthermore, she writes this story in the way that men would typically write; as Japanese scholar and writer Tomioka Taeko would describe it, Yoshiya uses the "national language" rather than the "woman's language" (Tomioka, 2006, 135-45). Despite this change from a 'flowery language' to a more 'scholarly' or blunt speech, she continues to use *hanakotoba* throughout the story. The question of "why" may now be asked, as this aspect of Yoshiya's writing is the only piece consistent with her other works, both before and after this story. Therefore, the purpose of the *hanakotoba* within the story, the various meanings of the story depending on the religion or origin of the meaning associated with the purple *shion*, as well as the purpose Yoshiya may have had in keeping to her personal theme of using *hanakotoba* despite writing a story that was meant to replicate a 'scholarly' or 'manly' form of writing are the focus of the upcom-ing section.

THE SHADES OF *S*HION AND HOW THEY COLOR "*ONIBI*"

"*Onibi*" follows a man named Chushichi as he goes around the city collecting payment for the gas company. One day he comes across a home that was all but bare except for the scorch marks on its walls and the "single tall nowfaded [*shion*]…densely grown… so tall it brushed [his] shoulder… its pale purple flowers lingering in plaintive bloom," that grew outside the kitchen door (Yoshiya). Inside the home he finds a haggard and gaunt woman at her stove, whom he confronts about her increasing gas bill. The woman pleads with him to give her more time or to forgive the bill cost as her husband has been ill for a longtime and requires the gas to boil down his medicine. Chushichi replies that he can only help by letting her pay for it through her body rather than money. He invited her to come to his home that night, if she dressed herself properly, of course. On his way out, "he once again brushed past the tall [*shion*] stalk and flowers," *(*Yoshiya*)*. Despite her desperation, the woman never showed up and Chushichi went to bed that night alone and angry. Several days later, he was again collect-ing money near her house when, "he caught sight of the [*shion*] blossoms blooming in front of the crumbling house… and with cool resolution he entered the house by the kitchen door close to the [*shion*]," (Yoshiya). He searched the kitchen for the woman, but all he found was the pale light of a gas flame burning high and bright on the stove. Traveling further into the home, Chushichi stumbles into the main bedroom and finds the woman's husband, now dead, "a small bunch of [*shion*]…that had been in bloom… placed by his head," (Yoshiya). Upon discovering this, Chushichi tries to

escape the home, only to turn around and see the woman hanging from her own obi. Regret and clarity dawns over Chushichi for the first time since he caught a glance of the dilapidated home all those days ago. He left the home, and the gas collection industry, after pleading: "Forgive me! I swear by the Buddha I shall mend my evil ways," (Yoshiya).

The story above is presented in a shortened yet detailed format, to highlight specifically how the characters and the *shion* interacted, during which moments focus was placed on the presence of the *shion*, and to provide a basic context for some of the theories that will be argued in the upcoming paragraphs. Furthermore, while vari-ous origins for the meanings of *shion* or aster, including those within cul-tures outside of Japan, it was decided to change the use of the English name 'aster' back into its original, Japanese counterpart '*shion*' as that was likely what was originally written and will, therefore, help distinguish possible meanings as there are English/West-ern specific meanings and Eastern/Japanese specific meanings.

The first 'shade' of *shion* that is dis-cussed is the typical Japanese reading. In Japan, the primary meaning of *shion* is "I won't forget you" and general re-membrance. This stems from a tradi-tional story from a collection known as *Konjaku Monogatarishu*, or on some occasions, *Oninoshikogusa* (Yasushi). The story tells of two brothers who mourn the death of their father. The older son plants licorice in front of his father's grave and never visits, however, the younger brother plants *shion* and visits daily. A demon watch-es these interactions and eventually bestows upon the younger brother the ability to see the future. It is believed that *shion's* meaning in hanakotoba comes from the younger brother's feeling towards his father (Yasushi). In "Onibi" this carries a dual tone, one sinister and the other repentant. Throughout the story the shion and Chushichi are constantly interacting; he brushes by it when he first opens the door, it catches his eye and draws him back to the home which he had purposefully been putting out of his mind, it lies next to the bodies of the dead, of which at least one was connected to his own doings and choices. There-fore, the shion symbolizes not only Chushichi's guilt for his actions as is shown in the closing scene, but also highlights the feelings of the woman who suffered at his hand. In the same way, it is my belief that the *shion* also symbolizes the woman's rebirth into the titular *onibi*, as well as the fact that she will never forgive nor forget the cruelness of Chushichi. In Japanese, *onibi* can be translated as demon fire, as well as referring to a demonic en-tity often born from malice, intense grudges, or dead bodies; in the story this is personified by the gas flame that Chushichi stumbles upon before finding both husband and wife dead. I argue that the *onibi* was brought forth by the woman's feelings towards her situation and her inability to fight off her husband's illness nor Chushichi's advances (Meyer).

Next in the discussion is the 'shade' of *shion* that arises from a more Western perspective. While it is uncertain if Yoshiya would have been influenced by these origin stories and symbolism, it highlights shared, as well as deep-er, meanings to the seemingly simple *shion*. Additionally, the convergence of both Western and Eastern symbolism in relation to *shion* is the best way to understand why Yoshiya might have continued to use *hanakotoba* within a writing style that was unco--nventional when compared to her typical works.

From a Western perspective, shion symbolized loyalty, spirituality, fortune, faith, and the wish for things to have happened differently—there are also instances of love, daintiness, affection, and wisdom, however none of these are exemplified within the story and are, therefore, inconsequential ("Aster Flower Meaning"; P., 2021;Thomas, 2022). To discuss the origins of these meanings, one will first start with the origin story that most closely relates to the Japanese parable. Com-ing from a Greek legend, Western us-ers of the language of flowers are introduced to King Aegeus and his son Theseus who offered himself up to slaying the Minotaur. Upon his return, Theseus was supposed to fly white sails to indicate he had survived but forgot to change them. The black sails lead a distraught King Aegeus to commit suicide after believing his son was dead. It is said that where King Aegeus' blood met the earth asters grew ("Aster Flower Meaning"). Similar to the story of the father's two sons, the *shion*, or asters in this case, came from a place of familial devotion and was shrouded by death in order to bloom. In this case, the *shion* grew as the result of an event that many had wished had happened differently. King Ae-geus wished that his son had made it home after slaying the beast, Theseus, upon finding his father, wished that he had not forgotten to raise white sails, and Chushichi found himself wishing that he had not been 'bewitched' and acted upon his 'strange fascination' (Yoshiya, 1951).

Here, it is best to mention a possible theory as to why Yoshiya continued her use of *hanakotoba*, even though she was imitating a more masculine writing style that was the antithesis of the 'flowery language'. By doing so, Yoshiya is commenting on two things.

Firstly, the basis of the Japanese language as created and continually supported by a 'flowery' or "woman's" language yet excluded to be used in the home or in works of little importance, yet as highlighted within her work, is a concept that could be merged into the "national language" or realm of literature of scholarly importance (Tomioka,2006, 135-45). Secondly, that she, while remaining true to her personal preferences for using hanakotoba, chose to do so by using a flower that has traditionally bloomed from the re-lationship between a father and son in a form filial piety adjacent love, there-fore twisting even *hanakotoba* into a medium that shows the prioritization of masculine roles within society.

To continue, the symbolism that indicates the wish for an event to have gone differently, in France, *shion* in-dicated the wish for a battle or war to have had a different outcome as the flowers were placed on the graves of fallen soldiers (P., 2021). This inter-pretation and origin of *shion* is what is perhaps be the most plausible as a foundation for Yoshiya's own use of the flower considering the period she wrote it in. "*Onibi*" was written in 1951 when Japan was still facing the aftereffects of WWII, a time that is reflected in her setting of the story. In the first description of the house, she refers to it as scorched and bare, with cracked glass around the kitchen door. By this description it is easy to make a connection between the appearance of the house with that of the devasta-tion caused by the fire bombings that rained down on Japan during the end of WWII. This description also indi-cates the importance of the lone stalk of *shion* that managed to remain and grow despite the trauma that the earth and building around it had suffered. In this way, the *shion*, which was often grown from the mix bloodshed cause by the bombings where the ground was disturbed to the point where all that it could give being a supporter of the war, especially as it occurred on Chinese soil, "*Oni-bi*" creates a story that addresses how the war affected Japan and its citizens at all levels of life.

The final 'shade' of *shion* is the one that stems from a Christian perspective. While Yoshiya was, to our best knowledge, not a Christian, "she used Christian motifs (churches, nuns, mis-sionaries, the Virgin)," throughout her primary work *Hana Monogatari* and, as argued in this paragraph, her other stories to add a "Westernized flavor" (Suzuki, 2006, 152). Once again turn-ing to France and the common act of placing *shion* on the graves of fallen soldiers, *shion* was also believed to be symbolic of the eye of Christ ("As-ter Flower Meaning"). As mentioned previously, the *shion*, Chushichi, and their interactions play an integral role within "*Onibi*". In the context of shion as a personification of God's presence, these interactions become a powerful form of foreshadowing. It is as if the *shion* is as omniscient as God himself, brushing Chushichi as he enters the home for the first time. This gives the audience the impression of the *shion* trying to remind Chushichi of one of two things: that God is always watching, so he should be careful and pick his actions wisely, or, depending how it is viewed, an action of support from above in a time where a devil might be tempting someone astray. The lines between the two continue to blur as one moves further into the story where Chushichi is brought back to the home after he catches a glance of the blooming stalk of shion. At this point, the audience could question if the of blood and soil, is a representation of all the *shion* is anything but the devil in first place, as it draws Chushichi back into the home once again as if in a trance. Should one assume that the shion instead represents God, one would instead see God lead Chushichi back into the home where he enacted his most grievous sin, forcing him to relive his actions and facing the consequences to encourage repentance for his sins. Nevertheless, and despite the motifs and Christian values that au-thors may force into Yoshiya's works, if there was a connection to religion as exemplified by the *shion*, it would be, as referenced in the story itself, Bud-dhism. However, no materials were found to support a specific Buddhist symbolism for *shion* or aster.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, discussions about what *shion* means in *hanakotoba* and the reason for Yoshiya to have used this particular flower as the mode of time and backbone within her story "*Onibi*" have been made. Furthermore, whether as literary flair or the separation from the writer it creates, Yoshiya chose to continue her usage of *hanakotoba* even in a story written to mimic popular male writers of the time who specifically wrote in a non-flowery style, symbolic or otherwise, however no conclusion has been reached. While it is not unlikely that more than one meaning or origin had influenced Yoshiya during her time of writing this story, further research into Yoshiya herself, as well as all parts of her life, is required to determine which of these theories, if any at all, would have coincided with her values and lifestyle the most.

Regardless of how Yoshiya had intended her use of *hanakotoba* to be read, this paper acts as an analysis of the dying language of flowers and how, by means of Japanese language and culture, its life prolonged if only by a couple decades.

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