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Feminism and Mythology: Hiratsuka Raicho and Japanese Feminism

In the early 1900s of Japan, Hiratsuka Raicho started a journal called *Bluestocking*. In its early years, it focused on women's literature. Soon after, the focus of the journal shifted to that of women's issues. In one of the first issues, Raicho made reference to Japan's creation myths in an attempt to stress the suppression of women's rights in Japan. I will introduce the ode to mythology in feminism in Japan in the 1920s by analyzing Raicho's "In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun". Through this analysis, I will attempt to determine the meaning behind Hiratsuka Raicho's use of mythology, specifically Amaterasu, as an expressive tone for feminism.

There are two specific elements I will be referencing in this paper, the first being feminism. Many women's liberation movements started across the globe in the early 1900s. One of them starting in Japan surrounding reproductive and societal rights. Therefore, how do we define feminism? Feminism is a complex ideology that stresses the need for equality among all peoples in society. They can be supported by any gender, although the way we will define it here may seem one sided.

The other term I will be referencing in this paper is mythology. It also has a complex history and a need for defining. All cultures have mythology, though they all have similar sub-categories, the purpose of those mythologies are influenced by the society. A short definition of mythology can be seen in Bohn who writes, "Myths are ways in which people explain *to themselves* who they are, what they are doing, and why" (3).

As this paper deals with feminism, I would like to give a more defined meaning of the feminism I am referring to. There are a number of different feminist movements throughout the world as well as a number of different ideologies of feminism throughout history. It is easiest to define this feminism by referring to Imam, et al. in *Philosophy of Feminism Inculcated among Working Women*, “Feminists work for eliminating obstructions to equal economic, social and political opportunities for female and object to the idea that a women’s value is mainly determined by her gender and that women are inherently inferior, subservient or less intelligent than men” (86). Therefore, the ideology I am working with is that which puts men and women on level ground, or stated differently, attempts to bring about the equality of men and women in society.

Additionally, there are various forms of feminism that are prevalent today that are sub-categories of a grander scheme. Imam et al. states, “There are various types of feminism (radical, socialist, liberal) which are varying from each other in their specific goals” (85). Radical feminism claims the oppression for women is due to biological ideals, socialist feminism attempts to obtain a socialist reform of the economy and liberal feminism seeks freedom for women in social roles. There is, however, another type of feminism that we will discuss in this paper and that is *cultural feminism*. Cultural feminism is what Hiratsuka Raicho worked most closely with, focusing on the protection of maternity for women in Japan.

An abundance of factors play into the idea of what feminism is and what it stands for. Due to its cultural and societal link, we could misunderstand feminism when referencing it within different cultures. However, Ueno Chizuko makes a bold and eye-opening statement in *The Making of a History of Feminism in Japan* when she says, “I do not think feminism can stand with nationalism. I do not want my nation to represent me, nor do I attempt to represent my

nation” (2). She then goes on to express that, “It seeks ‘inter-people’ relations rather than ‘international’ relations” (2). Thus, feminism is for all people, regardless of your nationality.

Feminism is a complex ideology for *all* peoples in an attempt to gain equal standing among them.

In addition to feminism, it is imperative that we define mythology. As we will discuss later the link of Japanese mythology to feminism, I would like to take time to give a more in depth look into this art form. In Bohn’s a “Handbook of Japanese Mythology”, he explains that myths have two elements, story-telling as well as providing structure in the lives of those of a culture. This is of great importance as it provides a base to work off of when referencing the mythology in Japan. What we should keep in mind is that Japanese mythology is heavily influenced from other cultures: specifically, China and India. Bohn states that Buddhism was “Introduced into Japan via China, these figures and deities became figures in Japanese mythology as well as under Japanese names and with Japanese attributes, but clearly sourced from a rich Hindu and Indian tradition” (7). What we need to know the most about the content of Japanese mythology is that it is used to explain how the world and Japan came to be. One of its main purposes is to tell a society how and why a people came into existence.

Much like feminism, mythology has sub-categories that have different purposes within a society. Robert Redfield coined two terms when working in Mexico, “Little Traditions” and “Great Tradition”. Little Traditions are seen as folk tales, these are generally unique in terms of geography and are most important in civilians. We, however, will be referring to the *Kojiki* which is a Great Tradition. Great Traditions are not told on small scales like Little Traditions. These are political, they are for the nation and are often written down and published. The *Kojiki* along with the *Nihon shoki* were written for the court as a representation of what Japanese court

life was like. However, the mythological character that both Hiratsuka Raicho and I will be referencing is Amaterasu.

There are four essential parts that we really must evaluate in order to properly understand the poetry of Hiratsuka Raicho. First, we must look at time period, the early 1900s of Japan. Second, we need a better understanding of Hiratsuka Raicho: her life and what she accomplished up to this point. Third, we need better understanding of the feminist movement in Japan during the 1920s. Lastly, we must look at mythology and the myth of Amaterasu.

The early 1900s in Japan were a stepping stone for women. From the late 1800s, women had begun working due to the first World War and the number of women in jobs had continued to grow. Mackie states that “women had been working in factories since the 1870s, while educated women were now moving into teaching, nursing, and clerical occupations” (45). While there was an increase in working women in these fields, 13000 to 57000 in nursing alone, there was another issue arising as well.

An anxiety in the early 1900s came from the government, and it surrounded this increase in working women. Their focus was on the family, more specifically the impact on family life and stability. The government feared that an increase in educated women and married women into the workforce would have negative impacts of family life. This fear resulted in the birth of a feminist movement.

Hiratsuka Raicho was at the front of this movement. This group of women adopted the name ‘The New Women’ and began to set up a dialog surrounding women’s reproductive rights. In the first issue of Raicho’s journal, *Bluestocking*, she brought forth an idea that started a debate

among female citizens by including Amaterasu in her poetry. Mackie includes a translated version of Raicho's work:

In the beginning woman was the Sun.

An authentic person.

Today, she is the moon.

Living through others.

Reflecting on the brilliance of others. . .(46).

This poem seems more like a challenge, one to open the eyes of the people surrounding her in hopes of sparking fire. Raicho seems to be saying that women were once at the forefront of civilization, standing proud and shined brightly. Now, however, this is not the case. Instead, women are shrouded in shadows of the society they were once an important part of. She equates women to the moon, hidden behind the blaze of a shining sun.

The feminism that arose out of this new group of women was vast in topics and a cultural feminism. Mackie writes, "While many of the New Women challenged the family system, their experiences with marriage, common-law relationships and the birth of their own children led them to consider the politics of motherhood and the possibility of reconciling their desire for the individual independence with the responsibility for the support of their children" (48). This latter, child bearing feminism, was Hiratsuka Raicho's main focus. She wrote articles in her journal, held meetings with liberal men, and started dialogs with other prominent female authors on it.

Although Raicho's poetry appears to appeal to natural imagery, like that of Yosano Akiko's, it instead references Japan's creation myths. Her poetry alludes to the sun, but in this instance, she is referring to Amaterasu, the sun goddess in Japanese mythology. What is interesting is this nod to mythology and older Japanese society as a way to embody her ideology. What I would like to determine is the meaning behind Hiratsuka Raicho's use of mythology, specifically Amaterasu, as an expressive tone for feminism.

For a better understanding of the literature of Hiratsuka Raicho, I would like to analyze the translated version of her poem. "In the Beginning, Woman was the Sun" is a five lined poem that utilizes contrastive language to project an idea. I will be analyzing this poem with prior knowledge of the time period, the movement Raicho participated in and the literature Raicho references.

The first line of Raicho's poem, "In the beginning woman was the sun" (46) seems to be looking back, as if a memory, almost. What is clear is that she is making reference to Amaterasu, the Sun goddess. Due to this reflection, her first section is warm and welcoming. Here, women are a cause for light, *the* cause. Raicho is making a statement that women stood alone, unwavering, with no need for assistance. This line is also reflective of how the sun is a necessity for life. All things in the world rely on the sun and it is an imperative part of living. Raicho makes sure to allude to these images and needs while expressing their feminine qualities.

In the second line, "An authentic person" (46), she dims away from reflection, instead, she makes a concise statement. She is calling women individuals, self-reliant and original. This is a way to express the type of person women used to be, before the shift in ideology. The tone of this line is still warm and uplifting, perhaps even reminiscent. Raicho delivers a powerful statement regarding her idea of what women were and could still be.

“Today, she is the moon” (46), is a stark shift in the feminine visual delivered in this poem. Raicho’s use of the moon as a contrast to her previous claim is deliberate. This invokes a cold tone, as the idea of woman is now surround in darkness. The picture painted by this shift is one where women no longer stand at the center of light. We see a tone that deepens, one that is still powerful, but moves farther from the beginning.

In line four she says, “Living through others” (46). This line is a re-enforcement of the shift made by the previous statement. Raicho reinforces this tone by expressing that women no longer live independently. Instead, they rely on others to live rather than living for themselves. The depressive tone is exasperating as Raicho expresses a caged feeling, one that does not diminish in her last line.

Finally, in line five she writes, “Reflecting on the brilliance of others...” (46). This is where Raicho returns to the use of warm language. It is not, however, a shift in tone as well. The use of brilliance as a descriptor is not in reference to women, but to the others that women live through. Brilliance, an adjective that could have easily been used in accompaniment of women in the beginning of this poem is now stripped from them and placed elsewhere. The ending tone is cold, lonely and dependent.

In the first two sections, the tone is reminiscent. It’s warm and inspiring a reminder, or ode to women long ago. The last three sections of this poem are cold and distant. Raicho uses the moon in a contrastive tone to the sun, making it seem as though others have taken the spot of the woman she spoke of. It is sadness, a realization of what that woman has become.

The language Hiratsuka Raicho uses in this poetry evokes natural imagery, as well as being contrastive. Her use of *sun* and *moon* are indicative of the ideas she is attempting to

express. In addition to this, she uses the word brilliance almost as a synonym for the sun.

Authentic, living, reflecting all meld into her work with a particular purpose. She uses them as descriptors and actions, making short, concise claims.

What is most interesting is her use of singular versus plural. When referencing women, she uses singular nouns such as woman and she. However, when talking about anyone but, her vocabulary becomes plural with *others*. This, much like the use of sun and moon, is used contrastively. She is invoking an us against them feeling in her audience by making women singular. Raicho makes use of vivid vocabularies to help her better express her own ideology.

Next, I would like to analyze the myth of Amaterasu, the sun goddess, hiding herself away and Amaterasu's relationship with Tukumiyomi, the moon god. These myths are incredibly important when analyzed from a feminist perspective, and I will explain more in the following sections. However, for all intents and purposes, I will analyze these myths in a similar fashion to that of Raicho's poetry. As a preface to Amaterasu hiding herself away, Susano-o has just rampaged through Amaterasu's land and injured someone. Amaterasu, frightened, retreats into a cave and locks herself away.

The beginning of this myth has a very frightened tone. Amaterasu is afraid of Susano-o's rampage and out of fear, runs away. In doing so, she plunges the world into darkness. The tone from everyone is that of fear, as the eight-hundred deities cry out at the lack of light. From this, "...all manner of calamities arose" (81), adding to the fear that the world as a whole felt. We can see that the author is expressing urgency and negativity.

From here the deities mobilize, and the tone of the passage changes to motivation. Due to the mobilization of the deities where they come up with a plan to lure Amaterasu out, the section

reads quickly. The deities have a mirror built, a divination was performed, and the deities acted as though they were holding a party. This is where the audience perceives this story from the point of view of Amaterasu and she is confused. She has assumed that the world would be dark, and no one would be capable of having enjoyment.

The next section is full of curiosity, with Amaterasu becoming more and more interested with what is happening outside. As she slowly begins her ascent from the cave, the story is full of suspense. The deities are waiting and hopeful that she will come out with the trap they have set for her. Amaterasu is leaving the cave, confused by the things going on outside.

When Amaterasu finally leaves the cave, there is a mixture of tones. The deities feel triumphant, as they have succeeded in their goal of luring out the sun goddess. Amaterasu is surprised as she discovers the deities had set up a ruse for her. However, the myth ends of a tone of relief as Susano-o is expelled from the land.

All of these elements come together, to make the reader feel a particular way when reading through the myth. Nonetheless, there are additional elements that are not so easily laid out for the audience. Throughout this myth, there is a seemingly unpleasant treatment regarding women which is seen in the divination and deceit by the deities. Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto, in a divine possession, exposes herself to the deities and they simply laugh about this action. This makes it seem as though the deities see women as entertainment and tools. The same can be said in reference to the luring out of Amaterasu. Instead of seeking her out and determining the cause for her retreat, the deities set up a trap and force her out to solve their problems.

This poem is especially interesting in reference to the myth of Amaterasu and Tukuyomi. In Japanese mythology the sun is represented by women and the moon is represented by men.

Amaterasu and Tukumyomi are both from Izanagi's purification after visiting the land of the dead, and they eventually marry. However, when Tukumyomi kills a food god, Amaterasu is angered which causes the separation of sun and moon, the creation of night and day.

Raicho's ode to Amaterasu's mythology is not surprising, as she is the embodiment of that which gives life. As previously stated, all things on earth need the sun to survive. Since its representation is female, and women also bear life in the form of giving birth, it would make sense for this to be deity to reference. Nonetheless, it is also important to remember the implications made when analyzing the luring out of Amaterasu. The eight-hundred myriad deities that lure her out do not see her pain. They only view her as a tool to keep the world in working order.

In terms of natural order, the shift from sun to moon in "In the beginning, Woman was the Sun" is very indicative of the relationship Tukumyomi and Amaterasu had. I would like to refer back to the mythology I explained early, regarding their separation and their representations. First by focusing on their relationship, I will attempt to work out some of the imagery Raicho used.

Amaterasu and Tukumyomi have a complicated relationship. They are opposite ends of the spectrum, quite literally day and night. The idea being that women provide life and watch over the family, while men are protectors of them all. However, through this mythology and their separation, we can see that Tukumyomi eventually has to live through others. When Amaterasu moves, and he is no longer permitted to see her, he must live a life of solitude. Raicho makes reference to this same idea, when making the shift to women becoming the moon. For her, it seems this shift is one where women are muted, blocked out by the sun that stands brightly in

front of it. What should also be noted is that the moon is illuminated by the sun. Therefore, it is restricted to only what the sun will allow.

It is impossible to know if Raicho had intended on this parallel, but it is an interesting concept. It is as if man has replaced woman at the forefront of society, which seems to be the argument Raicho was making. The implication of this holds steady in her views for maternal and reproductive feminism. Her ideology was an argument *for* motherhood and the freedom that women should be able to do as they desired. It seems that her use of Amaterasu is an embodiment of women historically and what she hopes women to become again. Raicho hoped for women to be free of a patriarchal family system, that single mothers be given assistance when needed to take care of their families. Amaterasu appears to be both an embodiment of women's struggle, as well as their potential. Her nod to mythology is unique to Japan, and one that any person reading would have quickly understood and felt a connection to.

Throughout this paper I have given elaborate definitions of its use of feminism and mythology, both of which are comprised of sub-categories. I specifically referenced cultural feminism, one that Hiratsuka Raicho advocated for, that dealt with women's reproductive health and motherhood. In terms of mythology we utilized Great Tradition, a political form of mythology, where we referenced the myth of Amaterasu being linked to Hiratsuka Raicho's poetry. These elements are of great importance for Hiratsuka Raicho and the early 1900s feminist movements. More importantly, through an analysis of Raicho's poetry and the myth of Amaterasu, we attempted to determine the use of mythology as a form of expression for mythology.

Through exploring the history of the early 1900s in Japan, we discovered that more and more women were entering the work force. Since women had to take up the mantle of men who

were away at war, educated and married women started flocking to jobs such as nursing and teaching. This increase in working women caused anxiety in the government, as they were concerned about family stability. Through this anxiety, a group of women emerged calling themselves 'The New Women'. At the forefront of 'The New Women' was Hiratsuka Raicho. She created a journal called *Bluestocking* where she opened a dialog among the female community regarding motherhood and reproductive rights. The opening of this journal made an ode to Japanese mythology, which incorporated a powerful message.

Raicho expressed her feminism through mythology. She utilized the myth of Amaterasu to better help those around Japan understand what she thought was clear. Women had been suppressed, even among the increase in female workers. She made sure to use vivid imagery of the sun and moon, Amaterasu and Tukuyomi, to express that women were no longer independent. They were chained to a societal ideal that they were only capable of family life in a patriarchal society. Raicho made mention of a shift that resulted in women now needing to live through other and watch as other shine while they remained locked away. Her hope was to utilize this imagery, mythology, in an easily understood manner to bring light back to women. For Raicho, women were life, they were Amaterasu who no living thing can live without.

In short, Raicho was as expressive and passionate in her poetry as she was in every day life. She fought for the rights of women and used her platform, *Bluestocking*, to reach women around the country. She hoped to spark fire within her community and make waves within her nation for a greater good. Her reference to mythology was methodical and precise so that she could achieve these goals. These objectives continued into the movements that followed. Muta Kazue focuses on the feminist movements that come in the latter half of the 1900s. She states in her article, "The possibility of a social movement through feminism's history in Japan":

“In a sense, it was also around this time that the "middle pivot" (the "Women's Liberation Union demanding the lifting of the pill ban against the law prohibiting abortion"), which created the strongest image of "Women's Lib", appeared” (294).

Through this translated quote, we can see that these ideologies harbored by Hiratsuka Raicho persevered throughout Japan and evolved. It is unclear whether these later movements seek to project their ideologies in a similar fashion to Raicho, and we will not elaborate on it here.

However, it could be that these later, more evolved movements gave nods to their predecessors in a similar fashion.

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