

## Original Paper

# A Literature Review on Japanese Tragic Female Images—In Case of *Memories of Matsuko*

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### Abstract

*Memories of Matsuko* is a masterpiece by the popular modern Japanese author Muneki Yamada, with a circulation of 1.2 million copies including the pocket edition book. The work portrays a tragic woman, Matsuko Kawajiri, who despites all her hardships, still laughs at life and courageously pursues love. However, such an active woman has come to a tragic end. Thus, the literary figure of Matsuko Kawajiri embodies the tragic nature of modern Japanese women from multiple perspectives, including the family and the workplace, and can be said to have representative characteristics.

### Keywords

*Memories of Matsuko*, Matsuko Kawajiri, tragic woman, Muneki Yamada

## 1. Introduction

*Memories of Matsuko* is a work that creates a tragic female figure, Matsuko Kawajiri, and points to the pressures faced by modern women. During this period, literature and media have sometimes compared the plight of women to a “Matsuko-style tragedy” to emphasize its poignancy. *Memories of Matsuko* by Muneki Yamada tells the tragic story that the protagonist named Matsuko Kawajiri was beaten to death by the violent youth group in her middle age after experiencing hardships and hardships, despite repeated attempts to revive herself.

Unlike previous studies, this paper specifically studies the image of tragic women in Japan, focusing on the female image of “Kawajiri Matsuko”, using *Memories of Matsuko* as an example. What happens to Matsuko Kawajiri as a typical Japanese woman may have been experienced by entire Japanese women. We can see how the fate of “Matsuko” includes the tragedy of millions of Japanese women, and from this we can see what pressures Japanese women face. And through this study, the significance of the

female image of “Matsuko” in reality is unearthed.

## **2. Summary of *Memories of Matsuko***

Kawajiri Sho is a second-year university student who has moved to Tokyo from Fukuoka. One day, his father visited him at his apartment with a bone in his hand. After a discussion, Sho was asked to sort out the belongings of his aunt, Matsuko. The next day, Sho went to Matsuko’s flat with his girlfriend Asuka. Accompanying the arrangement of her belongings, Sho follows Matsuko’s life through conversations with people who knew her before her death, including the neighbor of the apartment, Matsuko’s former lover Yoichi and her friend Megumi.

When Matsuko was also a junior high school teacher, an incident involving the loss of money occurred during a school trip. Matsuko was fired for defending her pupil Yoichi Ryu, the culprit, and for having been sexually harassed by the headmaster before. Fearing that her father would find out, Matsuko left home one afternoon and left town.

Matsuko has since worked as a waitress, Turkish girl and hairdresser. She has also even been in prison. During that period, she also fell in love with five men back and forth, but did not end up happy with either of them. One of them, Yamegawa, an aspiring writer, committed suicide. Yamegawa’s friend and rival Okano only teased Matsuko about her affections. Onodera, a customer, used Matsuko as a tool to make money. Shimazu, a barber and widower, did not wait for Matsuko to enter prison and started a family with another woman. Yoichi Ryu, a drug dealer and user, is a coward and does not dare to live with Matsuko.

After five failed relationships, Matsuko fell into complete despair. She lived a depraved life in her flat, with only eating and sleeping on her hands. Her body became misshapen and her vagabond-like appearance led to her being mistaken for a kidnapper, and she was shunned. She became mentally ill and became like a cripple, talking to herself while gazing at the Arakawa River, and her neighbors began to call her “Matsuko the Hated” behind her back.

When she went to the hospital, she was reunited with Megumi, who had come to visit an acquaintance. Megumi was worried about Matsuko’s change and told her that she was looking for a dedicated hairdresser. She then put a business card with her contact details on it in Matsuko’s hand. Jealous of the unchanged Megumi, Matsuko crumpled up the card in the park and threw it away. That night, Matsuko found herself remembering the action of cutting her hair, and when she went to the park to look for the business card and asked a group of young people if they knew her, she was assaulted and killed.

## **3. Cultivation of the Tragic Female Figure**

### **3.1 Social Dimension**

#### **3.1.1 Development of the Modern Japanese Economy**

The background of the work is set in the mid-Showa period, after the end of the Second World War. In

post-war Japan, the various industries were hit by a shock as big as a disaster and hit by terrific inflation. However, thanks to booming economic conditions, including the economic boom of the mid-1950s and the continuing economic boom of 1958-1961 and Izanagi economic boom (1965-1970), the Japanese economy, particularly in the manufacturing sector, recovered quickly. The continuing expansion of the size of the Japanese economy meant that in 1968 the total national output was already the second largest in the world. Later, due to the first world oil crisis, the Japanese economy tumbled into a period of low growth; after the 1970s, the Japanese economy fell into a short-term slump, but trade stabilized the economy due to a long-term export surplus. So, in the 1980s, when the financial environment was much more comfortable than before, stock prices and land prices increased substantially. However, what appeared on the surface to be a booming economy actually turned into a bubble economy. So, the bursting of the bubble caused asset prices to fall sharply and the Japanese economy fell into a prolonged slump in the 1990s. It is called the “lost decade”.

Since half a century, the Japanese economy has always fluctuated significantly. In response, public desire has also fluctuated. During the long-term boom, people’s greed became more and more inflated. What is often seen is that the public pushed blindly and obediently into the financial industry, without taking into account the real situation. There is “thoughtlessness” and “mania” floating in the air. When the recession becomes more serious, “tension” and “instability” are still transmitted among people. People’s personalities and ways of life are also changing with the fluctuating economic environment. Matsuko’s career is also full of ups and downs that continue like the Japanese economy. The author, Muneki Yamada, was born just in the Showa era (1926-1989) and would lament the changes in that era, borrowing from Matsuko’s encounters.

### 3.1.2 The Bondage of the Japanese Ethical System

Whether it is her father or the lover she met later, “men” accompany Matsuko throughout her life like shadows. When it comes to men, for Matsuko, it is first and foremost her father. Having been strictly trained by her father from a young age, Matsuko is more afraid of him than she respects him.

There are considerably fewer descriptions of the mother than the father’s sensitive sketches. Apart from the image of the chaste mother, she is overshadowed by the father. The patriarchal atmosphere is emphasized in the film. Matsuko tries her best to seek her father’s affection, but the only thing she gets in return at the end is a diary left behind by her father. From the outset, the lack of understanding and tolerance from her father leaves Matsuko no choice but to leave home and find someone who can comfort her in her emptiness and loneliness.

Matsuko craves love in this way, and when she meets someone who says they love her, she always lives with him or her with full love. Matsuko, who does not want anything in return, is repeatedly dumped by her lover, but she is afraid to live alone. Even if she is beaten or vandalized, it would be nice to have a man by her side. Why does Matsuko have no choice but to live in this way? Since “father” only includes men, she will always look for other men to return her father’s lost love.

In order to be independent and to have the same equality as men, women need to integrate into men's world, just as men integrate into theirs. Then there can be a mutually respectful exchange. However, because of the patriarchal system in Japan, Matsuko blended into her father's and lover's world as much as she could, only to be rejected and bludgeoned by men. For a long time, women's family status, or social status, has always been lower than men's. Men, who boast more about their economic and social conditions, make tougher demands on women. They demand sex and love from women, but cannot guarantee their consent and appropriate response in return. In addition, defective male values do not have a significant effect on men themselves but, on the contrary, hurt women.

### *3.2 Author Muneki Yamada's View of Women*

The author, Muneki Yamada, empathizes with the diverse ways of life of women. Whether it is a tumultuous life or an ordinary life, it is the same for him. The work contains the suggestion that life is not always smooth sailing, that it is enough to just live and not give up, even if you always hit a wall or are hit by repeated failures.

It is not the author's intention to make the reader think that Matsuko is unhappy or deservedly discarded. At the end of the work, when Matsuko dies, she is greeted in heaven by her sister Kumi, who says, "Welcome home" and "I'm home". It is a blessing for Matsuko. By depicting a solitary death, Muneki Yamada wants readers to look at society rather than criticize Matsuko.

Yamada does not absolutize even contemporary Japanese values such as democracy and freedom. In his work, he conveys a view of women that emphasizes independence and diversity in the way women live their lives. Certainly, the freedom and independence called for today are seen as the best way for women to live. However, most women cannot live this way, and women who are troubled by different predicaments should also gain interest and understanding. Since the way of life is determined solely by one's own choice, hopes and appropriate paths should be respected.

## **4. Realistic Meaning**

### *4.1 Hope Entrusted to Young People*

Sho is a second-year college student in the sciences who has moved to Tokyo from Fukuoka. He is portrayed as a modern college student at a difficult university, living off part-time jobs and scholarships while also smoking, drinking beer, and having sex. Although he seems to attend classes, he listens to lectures and is apathetic about studying.

In the process of following Matsuko's life, he shows a variety of emotions: prejudice against her way of life, confusion, sympathy, and escape from it. However, he also shows kindness and compassion, going out of his way to deliver a lost Bible to the church, and he takes a proactive approach to Matsuko's life. While wandering around, the character is portrayed in a way that also reminds us of the possibility of growth and hope.

From the beginning, even Sho, who is reluctant about Matsuko, is impressed by Matsuko's life after he finds out the truth. In particular, when the group of young men who killed Matsuko are tried, Sang, angered by their selfishness, becomes a different person.

Through Sho's growth, the author would like to convey that the young people have hope. He does not expect them to become docile quickly, but he does entrust them to be able to think in their own way, to take in the experiences of other people's lives, and to put forth the effort they deserve for the future.

#### *4.2 Implications for Contemporary Women*

In the works, different female figures are portrayed. In addition to Matsuko, the main character, her friend Megumi also makes a deep impression on the reader as a contrast. Unlike Matsuko, Megumi is not overly dependent on a man. From this point of view, Megumi gives us the image of a strong, independent woman of today. Through vivid contrasts, Matsuko and Megumi's choices are diametrically opposed, and some have cynically pointed out Matsuko's downfall. Certainly, there is a part of "self-responsibility" due to her clumsiness in Matsuko's fall. However, the fact that there was an expression of resistance in her fall is worth learning about her attitude toward life and her merits, such as her diligence.

In the past, for most women, happiness was about raising a family with a man and raising children. This is also considered traditional happiness. As times have changed, happiness now has not only one form, but also a variety of possibilities. However, it seems a bit inappropriate to excessively call for freedom and independence in this day and age. We do not deny the freedom and independence of life, but we do not regard them as absolutes either. There will always be women in modern society who cannot adapt to excessive calls for independence. On the other hand, if such women suffer from the independent way of life, they may find traditional happiness.

Whether they are like Matsuko or Megumi, they should be free to be completely independent of men or dependent on men, as long as it is the result of their own initiative and decision. Women should emphasize the independence and diversity of their own way of life.

### **5. Conclusion**

As a traditional Japanese woman, Matsuko faces low status in the family and the injustice of being silenced by society. From the perspective of her resistance to painful realities, Matsuko is an active, diligent, and hardworking woman who, at one point in her life, even earns a living independently. However, from childhood to adolescence, as a man, she lacks her father's love, and after leaving home, Matsuko becomes extremely dependent on other men. After five unsuccessful relationships, Matsuko leads a life of total depravity. In the end, Matsuko decides to become a hairdresser once again, but the end result of being murdered by a group of young men does not change her mind in any way.

Overall, it is not only her own character that causes Matsuko's tragedy, but also the invisible rules of society.

In addition, *Memories of Matsuko* not only depicts the plight of modern women, but also seems to make readers think about the inherent nature of human beings and society. However, this paper cannot examine how a group of young people can kill Matsuko with such impunity. Is this a problem with modern education, or is it also due to the family environment and life background? It will be necessary to discuss this issue again in the future.

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