

Anna SPECCHIO
Foreign Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures, University of Turin
Turin, Italy
anna.specchio@unito.it

**EUTOPIZING THE DYSTOPIA. GENDER ROLES, MOTHERHOOD AND
REPRODUCTION IN MURATA SAYAKA'S *SATSUJIN SHUSSAN***

Recommended Citation: Specchio, Anna. “Eutopizing the Dystopia. Gender Roles, Motherhood and Reproduction in Murata Sayaka’s *Satsujin shussan*”. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 4.1 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjcst.2018.5.06>

Abstract: From the start of her career, contemporary Japanese writer Murata Sayaka¹ has been writing novels that dismantle the existing politics of gender, family and sexuality through stories set in dystopian or surrealistic worlds. In *Satsujin shussan (The Birth Murder)* she depicts a society in which a person can kill another if s/he gives birth to other ten. Women are given a contraceptive implant at the time of their first menstruation, sex is conceived as an act of lust, and pregnancy occurs exclusively by assisted fertilization and is also possible for men through the use of artificial uteri. This paper proposes a textual analysis, arguing how Murata creates a feminist “reproductive eutopian dystopia” and breaks both the concept of reproductive body as exclusive to females and the concepts of pregnancy and motherhood. The novel will be explored from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Japanese Literature, Utopia, Dystopia, Feminism, Gender-free Pregnancy, Gender Relations, Artificial Reproduction.

In her novel *Satsujin shussan (The Birth Murder)*, Murata Sayaka (b. 1979), expresses the idea that, in an undefined but not very distant future, Japanese women will finally be free. This includes freedom from unwanted pregnancies, freedom from gender norms and freedom to adopt children without the prerequisite of marriage. The novel was published in 2014, and that very year it won the Measures to Counter

¹ In this paper, I have chosen to follow the Japanese rule and write the Japanese names in the surname-name order.

the Falling Birth-rate Special Prize of the Sense Gender Award given by the Japanese Association for Gender, Fantasy & Science Fiction. The novel presents a future in which the Japanese government adopts a new social system from abroad. This system allows the solving of the falling birth rate problem, that has always been lower than the “replacement rate.”² Despite presenting itself as an optimistic vision, *Satsujin shussan* has been interpreted by critics as “horrific and dystopian” (Seaman B: 96, Nagakura *Tokyo keizai online*, Fujwara *Mainichi shinbun*), due to the so-called “birth-murder system”, which allows one person to kill any other person if s/he becomes an *umihito*, a “breeder,” and gives birth to ten healthy children. On the other hand, if someone accidentally commits homicide without having fulfilled the sanctioned duty, s/he is condemned to the new “life penalty”: s/he is imprisoned and forced to continuously bear children. When an *umihito* has given birth to ten children, s/he can submit the murder request to the city hall and indicate the person s/he has chosen to kill. The victim is notified that s/he has to die and subsequently becomes a *shinihito*, that is a “dead-to-be”. In order to allow men to participate in the system, they are implanted artificial uteri. Thus, the “birth-murder system” guarantees equal opportunities for both women and men. I shall return to the definition of the category of *umihito* and its implications, as well as to the themes of reproduction, pregnancy and sexuality later, as my prime concern here is to demonstrate why it may not be entirely appropriate to apply the term “dystopian novel” to this story.

A feminist reproductive eutopian dystopia

If we conceive of *Satsujin shussan* as a dystopian novel, as far as it deals with the theme of control over reproduction and fertility, we should then consider it as an example of “reproductive dystopia” alongside with other well-known novels such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), P.D. James’s *Children of men* (1992), Hillary Jordan’s *When She Woke* (2011), or the more recent *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas. To what extent is it correct to define *Satsujin shussan* as belonging to the dystopian genre? First of all, let us start with some considerations regarding the concept of dystopia. Mohr defines feminist “transgressive utopian dystopias” (Mohr 3) as hybrid texts that incorporate the “development of a utopian

² For more information, see, for instance, https://www.indexmundi.com/japan/birth_rate.html.

subtext within a narrative that starts out as a predominantly dystopian text” (Mohr 22), including the aforementioned *Handmaid’s Tale*. She also specifies that

women writers do use the stock conventions of dystopia, but – carrying patriarchy, technological advances, and the oppression of women to a logical extreme – they refocus these to expose their interrelation with questions of gender, hierarchy, biological reproduction, and women’s rights (Mohr 36).

Yet, in *Satsujin shussan*, we find neither the hellish vision of the reality typical for the genre, nor an open critique of the “birth-murder system”. Moreover, unlike many dystopian novels set in invented frightening societies, *Satsujin shussan* is set in Tokyo a hundred years after the implementation of the new social system, now seen as normal. The “birth-murder system” is presented at the beginning of the story by the first narrator protagonist Ikuko, who describes the present situation and the social changes as follows:

A long time ago, people used to fall in love, marry and have children with sex. But as time went by, they started having children using artificial insemination and sex became a mere act of expression of love and pleasure. As contraceptive technology developed, it became the norm to control women’s uteri at the first menstruation, and the causal relationship between having sex and getting pregnant got steadily divergent. Due to the absence of accidental birth, the population diminished dramatically. In a world where the population was visibly decreasing, it was only natural that a system for creating life separately from love and marriage was created. A more reasonable system that matched the modern age. The “birth-murder system,” which allows to kill one person if you give birth to other ten, was introduced from abroad before I was born. Although it was proposed long time before, it took some time for it to be actually adopted in Japan due to some opposition. However, as the government implemented it, everyone realized that it was much more natural than the old system, or at least this is what our teacher told us at school. (Murata 14-15)³

³昔の人々は恋愛をして結婚をしてセックスをして子供を産んでいたという。けれど時代の変化に伴って、子供は人工授精をして産むものになり、セックスは愛情表現と快樂だけのための行為になった。避妊技術が発展し、初潮が始まった時点で子宮に処置をするのが一般的になり、恋をしてセックスをすることと、妊娠をすることの因果関係は、どんどん乖離していった。偶発的な出産がなくなったことで、人口は極端に減っていった。人口がみるみ減少していく世界で、恋愛や結婚とは別に、命を生み出すシステムが作られたのは、自然な流れだった。もっと現代に合った、合理的なシステムが採用されたのだ。殺人出産システムが海外から導入されたのは、私が生まれ

Even if a first-person narrator could influence the readers with her interpretation of reality, Ikuko does not seem to take a precise position in regards to the new system although we soon discover that Ikuko has a sister, Tamaki, who has become an *umihito* in her teens. Ikuko simply explains the circumstances that had led to its importation, the implication being that there is some distance between what she was told as a child and her actual beliefs. Given the ambiguous position of the first person narrator, it can be said that Murata Sayaka encourages readers to be critical, even forcing them to take a position for or against the system. Given that we are posited to live in the “before,” it would seem quite obvious for us to take a position *against* the “birth-murder system”, as it deprives us of what we consider to be our values, consequently deeming it a dystopian society. For Ikuko, her reality is not dystopian, it is *the norm*, and she does not seem to regret the old times as it usually happens in dystopian novels. For this reason, the Japanese critic Iida Yūko affirms that:

Although it may appear as a kind of dystopian novel, it is based on the sense of uneasiness felt toward the contemporary gendered system. However, the novel does not turn into a structure that supports present values through the denial of a future society where the presence of love and gender as we know them today have been lost. The novel dismantles the present. In Murata Sayaka’s works, love, gender and other things are portrayed as extremely claustrophobic. (Iida 70)⁴

Since it does not criticize what for the time of the narration is the current system and it depicts our present society as old-style and unnatural, *Satsujin shussan* should not be classified entirely as a dystopian novel. Instead, it promotes some ideas that have been put forward by feminist theorists like Shulamith Firestone in order to reach gender equality, such as the artificial insemination or the use of artificial uteri, with the notable difference that Murata does not suggest external uteri for women but internal uteri for men, giving new agency to male bodies and imagining a world

る前のことだ。もっと以前から提案されいたものの、10人産んだら一人殺してもいい、というこのシステムが日本で実際に採用されるのには、すこし時間がかかった。殺人反対派の声も大きかったからだ。けれど、一度採用されてしまうと、そちらのほうがずっと自然なことだったのだと皆気付くこととなった、と学校で教師は得得と語った (My translation).

⁴一重のディストピア小説のようであるが、現在の制度の強制性に対する違和感が基盤になっており、恋愛や性などの現在あるものが失われた未来社会を否定することが、現時点で失われかけているその価値を支えるという構造になっているわけではない。現在を解体することが、真に志向されている。村田沙耶香の作品においては、制度化された恋愛も性もきわめて窮屈なものとして描かれている (My translation).

where men can perform like women and not vice versa, as I will explain in the next paragraph. From this point of view, *Satsujin shussan* can be interpreted as an example of “feminist utopian” fiction, that particular genre that “criticizing natural reproduction as a mechanism of oppression, (...) suggests artificial insemination, parthenogenesis, and in-vitro fertilization” (Mohr 24).

Murata Sayaka has created *Satsujin shussan* and other stories, including the long novel *Shōmetsu sekai* (*Dwindling world*, 2015), where she depicts a society where love, family, and sex do not exist anymore and the perpetuation of the human species is granted by a lottery which selects men and women for artificial insemination, with the declared intention of writing utopian fiction (Fujiwara *Mainichi shinbun*). Abolishing love, family, and sex, Murata creates what for her represents a utopian society where women and men have the same possibilities and have reached gender equality. Her interviews reveal that she has developed this idea due to her work experience. Murata Sayaka is not a full-time writer: after working as a waitress in a family restaurant, she is now a part-time clerk at a convenience store – experience that she will develop in an original way in *Konbini ningen* [*The convenience store person*, 2016⁵], the novel with which she won the 155th Akutagawa Prize and that officially projected her as a nationally renowned writer). For instance, in the interview given to the *Weekly Tokyo Keizai*, she stated that:

Since uniform at the convenience store are the same for men and women, “women” are not emphasized. The work at the family restaurant was a little bit different, as they told us “Please do not forget to wear stockings, do your make-up everyday and behave properly as people are always watching you”. On the contrary, at the convenience store one may work “fresh and naturally”, as the line between men and women is very thin. Since my childhood, I had the feeling that I “had to behave like a

⁵ Recently translated into English language by Ginny Tapley Takemori and published by Grove Press with the title *Convenience Store Woman* (12th June 2018). The English title clearly suggests that the protagonist of the story is a woman, while Murata uses the Japanese word *ningen*, that is *person*. The noun *ningen* do not convey any gendered meaning and reflects the intention of the author to create a world where genders are neutralized. Maybe, the title *Convenience Store Person* would not be as attractive for the English speaking public as *Konbini ningen* is for the Japanese speaking one, an aspect that suggests how when analyzing a text from the *gender studies/feminist studies* perspective one should also take into consideration the characteristics of the language in which that text is written and the meanings the word used may convey.

girl”, and being able to work as neither a female nor a male but as a simple clerk gave me a great sense of freedom (Horikawa 168)⁶.

The feeling that she “had to behave like a girl” has gradually turned out, as Murata grew up, into the oppressive feeling that she had to find a man, marry, and have children. The same feeling is felt by the thirty-six-years-old protagonist of *Konbini ningen*, which reveals that the current basis of social policy in Japan is not much different from the one in the second part of the twentieth century. In describing the politics of the modern Japan, in fact, Kano Ayako argues that there is “the assumption that all women are potential wives and mothers” (Kano 15-16). The clerk, for Murata, represents a “neutral” essence that is an in-between, a gender-free being, the same as the *umihito*. Let us assume that the neutral essence may be an ideal, or else, a utopian one, as it seems to be for Murata as well as for Ikuko. As a matter of fact, it is important that the concept of utopia responds to the specific needs of the person who describes it. To quote Ruth Levitas, “one of the reasons why people work with different definitions of utopia, is because they are asking different questions” (Levitas 179). In a broader sense, it is possible to pin down utopia as a “better solution” rather than an ideal one, though. From the reading of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we have learnt that “better never means for everyone... it always means worse, for some” (Atwood 211). Better for Murata/Ikuko, but, in the case of *Satsujin shussan*, worse for another character of the novel. Sakiko belongs to the sect called the Rudbeckia Society, a group founded with the intention of dismantling the “birth-murder system” and restoring the old Japanese values of family and love. When Sakiko is chosen by Tamaki as a *shinihito* and she tries to escape from Japan, she is arrested by the special unit tasked with monitoring the *shinihito*, which, like the “Thought Police” of Orwell’s *1984* or the “Eyes” in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* reminds us that one cannot escape the system.

Therefore, as it merges both utopian – in its individual, positive acceptance defined by its homophone *eutopian* – and dystopian aspects, I suggest that *Satsujin shussan* should be defined as a feminist reproductive eutopian dystopia.

⁶コンビニの制服は男女同じで、「女性」が強調されない。ファミレスだと「ちゃんとストッキングをはいて、お化粧もしてきてください、いつも見られる側として美しく立ち振る舞ってください」と、少し違った。コンビニは《ドすっぴん》でもよくて、男女の垣根がすごく低い。自分自身は幼年期からずっと「女の子らしくしなきゃ」という思いがあったので、男でも女でもない、ただの店員という中性的な存在として働けることはすごい解放感だった (My translation).

***Umihito* as m/others. Questioning gender roles with technology in the womb**

Satsujin shussan proposes a new social system which promotes artificial insemination and the use of mandatory contraceptives for women. The seizure of control of reproduction as a means to eliminate biological inequalities between women and men was proposed by feminist activist Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Firestone advocates a revolution which controls new technologies to free women from their wombs and their natural bodies, and allow gender equality. She states that “artificial reproduction is not inherently dehumanizing. At very least, development of the option should make possible an honest re-examination of the ancient value of motherhood” (Firestone 181). However, is it possible to argue that artificial reproduction under the jurisdiction of the “birth-murder system” helps restore the ancient value of motherhood and is not dehumanizing? This issue may appear controversial. Let us analyze the question of artificial insemination and motherhood, which are intimately linked with the category of *umihito*.

In Japanese literature, the first examples of heroines who tried to free themselves from their bodies and their reproductive functions appear in works written by female writers whose debut period coincides with the beginning of the so-called *ūman ribu*, the Japanese women’s liberation movement which arose between the 1960s and the 1970s. However, the majority of them failed to find an approach that could separate sexual pleasure from procreation⁷, perhaps because of the assumption that “feminism (...) perceived the child raising, nurturing woman’s body as the site of the difference between women and men, and acclaimed the ideal of womanhood grounded in that body” (Mizuta 88). This theory derives from an ideological path that admits only female mothers, and it is developed in a dual-gender system where “the ontological domain is circumscribed so that an adult is either a man or a woman, but is not both and not neither” (Zack 141). Men have been conceived as the free category because their body is not subject to natural cycles and changes in shape, and they cannot bear children without a uterus. Therefore, women

⁷ For more information on Japanese feminism and Japanese literature, see, for instance, Bullock, Julia C. *The Other Women’s Lib. Gender and Body in Japanese Women’s Fiction*, University of Hawaii Press, 2010 and Bullock, Julia C, Ayako Kano and James Welker (edited by), *Rethinking Japanese Feminism*, University of Hawaii Press, 2017.

imagined they could gain freedom only with the diffusion of contraception or external artificial uteri which would allow them to perform like men and, in the meantime, become mothers without being pregnant, that is with the development of technologies that “separated pleasure from procreation” (Mizuta 88). This strategy dismantles both the myth of women’s freedom to be obtained by liberation from their own wombs, and the idea of a dual-gender system where *umihito* can be interpreted as a new hermaphrodite or a gender-free category of human being. In Murata Sayaka’s eutopian society, they represent the closest to the neutral or the hybrid category of the clerk in the convenience stores. *Umihito* can be performed by both men and women without being necessarily one or the other. As a person develops the idea of killing a person and becomes an *umihito*, as Tamaki and Chika’s murder have done, s/he is separated from society and spends the entirety of one’s pregnancies – only ten years for the lucky ones – in the “Centre”, a sort of sacred space where they are asked to give birth to one child after another, just as baby-making machines. Since the new regime is established in a falling birth rate history period, people who contribute to bear children are venerated as Gods by the rest of the society. The Centre substitutes current maternity unities in the hospitals and is in charge of taking care of the newborns who will be given up for adoption – even if the conditions for adoption are not mentioned in the novel.

The category of *umihito* is interrelated with an important question: if an *umihito* is a biological male human being, should he be considered as his children’s natural father or mother? As the new system only allows artificial insemination, it does not necessarily mean that a male *umihito* is the father of the baby he is bearing in his artificial womb – and the question of who donates the sperm it is not clear. Yet, he is neither the biological mother. Rather, he can be defined a *m/other*, as he represents something *other* than a proper mother. We can apply the same definition in the case of the female *umihito*; if “mothers refer to the maternal function of women” (Braidotti B: 77), that is the function carried on by the parent who raises, nurses and cares for the child, then, even female *umihito* should be conceived as *m/others*, as they are mothers only in a “minimalist sense” (Seaman B: 97). Independently from the biological sex, *umihito* are mere incubators, temporary containers that produce human beings. Therefore, Murata’s vision clashes with and undermines Firestone’s assumption, as artificial reproduction in the “birth-murder

system” discusses and recreates the old value of motherhood using the denaturalized bodies of *umihito*.

Regarding motherhood, Kano reminds us that “it can mean everything, from the psychological function of the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and uterus, to experiences of pregnancy and childbirth” (Kano 119). Thus, in *Satsujin shussan* it is possible to distinguish three types of motherhood. First, the motherhood of the category of *umihito*, as they experience it during their pregnancies and childbirths. Second, the motherhood experienced by people who raise children born at the Centre and perform the role of the parents. There is also the motherhood experienced by women who choose to have children on their own and have their contraceptive removed to be artificially inseminated. Thanks to the first type, motherhood ceases to be the prerogative of the female gender, and it is turned into a universal option. In Murata’s Japan, men can become *m/others* without being fathers and can finally access the two “most profound body events” (Pizzini), that is motherhood and maternity, with their bodies changing in shape in a new exclusive gender politics where they are “no longer needed for making babies” (Seaman B: 97).

Population (re)production and corpses that matter

Under the “birth-murder system,” the new circle of life is based on the dehumanizing assumption that human life is a “fungible product”: one can buy the life of another at the price of other ten, an economical exchange which can be translated in the trade of bodies for corpses. Furthermore, to improve and accelerate reproduction in the sense of production of lives, artificial insemination is used, depriving people from their natural desire to create a new life with and for love. Life turns into a commodity, into something which should be produced. *Umihito* are the clerks who show you their products, fresh and healthy babies to carry at home directly from the Centre, the convenience store of life. At the beginning of her research on pregnancy and fertility in Japan, Amanda Seaman quotes the 2007 accident in which “Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare Yanagizawa Hakuo called women «baby-making machines,» noting that since «the number of women between 15 and 50 is fixed... all we can ask is for them each to give their all.»” (Seaman A: 2). Seaman specifies that Yanagizawa’s subsequent apologies “only fanned the flames, since in it he reiterated his conviction that a woman’s duty was to have children” (Seaman A: 3). No wonder women get offended by that declaration, as no one would like to be deprived from her

nature and compared to an industrial machine. However, in Murata's future society, people can choose whether to temporarily put their human nature aside and become "baby-making machines" assigned to the production line of life. Pregnancy becomes a socio-economic product, in a new politics where labor is not differentiated according to biological sex and manufacture occurs in special "Centers" constituting human factories.

In *Satsujin shussan*, everyone talks about the accomplishments of *umihito* and their bodies. As a matter of fact, "the conversations in the book revolve around personal bodily maintenance such as the concern about uv-rays on the skin and the improbable fashion of consuming snacks made of insects" (Seaman B: 97). The "birth-murder system" gives priority to (re)production over the body, as the latter is seen as something transitory and interchangeable. Nevertheless, the body is always taken into consideration. The identity of the individual ceases to assume importance at the expense of one's body, which ought to be kept healthy and in good condition – it might become a well performing "baby-making machine". Thus, we can affirm that *umihito*'s bodies are given great attention as far as they are useful to the society, since they are interchangeable commodities subject to wear and tear. When Tamaki finally concludes her service as *umihito*, her body is at the end of its strength and has no choice other than to use a wheelchair. Therefore, "murder has been naturalized as something not horrific but an activity that you have to earn through hard bodily work" (Seaman B: 97). This implies that a body that gave birth to ten little bodies is evaluated as one corpse, in a completely unbalanced equation.

In one of the first scenes, the protagonist Ikuko is in her office rubbing the sunscreen to protect her skin from the sunlight that filters through the windows and she hears cicadas chirping outside. In the Japanese tradition, cicadas are one of the symbols of summer and a metaphor for human life, as adult specimens live no more than seven days – as reminded by the title of one of the most successful novel of these years, Kakuta Mitsuyo's *Yōkame no semi* (lit. "The cicada of the eight day", 2008, translated into English as *The Eight Day*). In *Satsujin shussan*, the image of cicadas as a metaphor for human life is intensified by their "snackization": as quoted above, the novel proposes the commercialization of healthy snacks made of insects, but more precisely they are snacks made of cicadas. Their short life may be suddenly interrupted by someone who wants to eat their bodies, killing them for personal purposes. As with the lives of cicadas, the lives of human beings have become a

fungible product. Every *shinuito* receives a formal letter from the city hall where s/he is notified the day s/he is going to be murdered, that is her or his “expiration date”. In order not to have the *shinuito* defend herself or himself, they are anesthetized and the homicide happens while they are not conscious, a last fragment of humanity in a cruel world. If they are really reluctant to be killed, they can choose to commit suicide – which means they are proposed a Hobson’s choice. *Shinuito*’s funerals are celebrated as a great event, as the funeral of a hero who has given their precious life for the country. Their corpses, or better, their white bones, are shown to the participants who admire them as sacred relics and offer a white flower⁸:

As we got to the funeral hall, Chika’s white bones were lying in the grave.

It seems that most of the *shinuito* left alone with their *umuito*, after a day and a half, have corpses damaged to the extent that it is impossible to identify them. This is the reason why they are burnt to the bones before the funeral.

Carrying white flowers from the stem, we put them into the grave, gradually covering Chika’s bones with pure whiteness.

Away from my fingertips, the dahlia sank into Chika’s skull. Despite her small frame, her bones were curiously big. Then it was Misa’s turn. Chika’s breast bone caught it and the flower seemed to bloom.

“Thank you.”

I lowered my head to Chika’s parents who were standing next to me with their aura of nobility. Thank you for dying on behalf of us. That is what attendants at a funeral are supposed to say when they express their gratitude to the family of the *shinuito*.

(Murata 55-56)⁹.

⁸In Japan, both black and white are mourning colours.

⁹葬儀場へ行くと、棺桶の中にチカちゃんの白い骨が横たわっていた。

「ウミヒト」と二人きりにさせられ、半日後に出てくる死に人の遺体は、誰だか判別できないくらいに損傷している場合が大半だという。そのため、焼いて骨にしてから葬式を行うのだ。

私たちはそれぞれ手にしている白い花を茎からもぎ取り、棺桶の中へと入れていった。白い骨が少しずつ、真っ白な花たちに埋もれていく。

私の指先から離れたダリアの花は、チカちゃんの頭蓋骨の中へと沈んでいった。チカちゃんの小柄なのに、骨は奇妙に大きかった。ミサキも桔梗の花をもぎ取って、棺桶に入れた。その花は、胸骨にひかかって、チカちゃんの胸元でぱっと咲いたようになった。

「ありがとうございます」

横に立っているチカちゃんの遺族に頭を下げた。私たちの代わりにしんでくれてありがとうございます。そういう意味をこめて、参列者は「しにひと」の遺族にお礼を言うことになっている。(My translation)

Ikuko and the other persons who live under the “birth-murder system” are used to the presence of *shinimoto* and their bones. In the exact moment they receive the notice, *shinimoto* turns into what Braidotti defined “corpses-to-come” (Braidotti A: 113). Corpses matter as they “become the measure of the living being” (Braidotti B: 89). The vision of the *shinimoto* is thus supposed to change one’s assumption about life, yet, in *Satsujin shussan*, there is a two-pronged opinion on this issue. In fact, despite the fact that *umimoto* seem to sacrifice themselves for the sake and the future of the society, spending more than ten years of their lives bearing children, they go through all of this for simply one reason: they have the intention to murder someone – if they just wanted to become parents, they could have chose the artificial insemination once, without becoming *umimoto*. They sacrifice themselves not to give life, but to deprive one person of it. When Ikuko brings Sakiko to visit Tamaki at the hospital at the time she is pregnant with her last baby, Tamaki judges Sakiko to be unsuitable for their society and decides that she has to die. Sakiko is condemned because she defends old Japanese values of family and love and seems the personification of the feminist naturalist current which insists to “resist exploitation, medicalization, and technologization of the women’s bodies” (Kano 101). As indicated by Kano, “the emphasis on nature in Japanese debates has much in common with what is manifested as a religious position elsewhere in the world” (Kano 115).

Tamaki’s decision to kill Sakiko may therefore be conceived as an allegory for the prevalence of technology over nature, and of techno-feminism over naturalist feminism (and, as a consequence, of Murata Sayaka’s feminist eutopian dystopia over our current gendered society). However, as she sets out to kill the young girl with Ikuko since the law admits a helper in case the *umimoto* is too weak, the two sisters find out that Sakiko was pregnant and that they have murdered her as well as her fetus. The discovery may be interpreted as they have just killed two lives. Tamaki tries to reassure Ikuko that “a fetus is not a murder” (Murata 118)¹⁰, declaring her “an embryo is not a human being” position, but her sister does not seem to think the same. After having been in an ambiguous position throughout the story, she feels she needs to take responsibility for the new life they have killed violating Sakiko’s bodily autonomy and finally accepts the nature of the “birth-murder system” and decides to give herself the “life penalty” and become an *umimoto*.

¹⁰胎児は殺人にはあたらないよ。(My translation)

Conclusions

Subversion, transgression and deconstruction are the principal ingredients of the literally universe of Murata. In *Satsujin shussan*, she shows a future of almost all-female society where women do not see men as enemy or obstacles to their freedom – as it happens in other feminist utopian novels. Yet, in spite of the fact that in this future Tokyo men live peacefully with women, all the *umihito* and the *shinihito* we encounter during the story are women, just as if the entire narration was settled in what Hofstede defined a “Femininity” dimension (Hofstede 297).¹¹ This points out that women actually have the power: they can give you life as well as they can deprive you of life – of course, a man who has accomplished his duty as *umihito* can kill a woman, but then the murder will not turn into a femicide, as it will not be a sex based hate crime. In the end, Murata frees women from all the current impositions and turns them into potential killers, just as she wanted us to remind that a future in the hands of an almost all-women society may be as eutopically equal as dystopically merciless – a perspective analogue to the one given by Naomi Alderman in her *The Power* (2017), a story set in a future society where gender roles are completely reversed to the point that, in the meta-narrative comment that follows the narration, the editor in charge to review the novel suggests that the story may be included in the male literature canon. The subversion and the transgression of gender roles that can be seen in *Satsujin shussan* are the final steps of a long process of integration of the new technologies within our everyday life, as the artificial uteri implanted to men are the great revolution in the future Tokyo. This aspect reminds us what other feminist critics such as Donna Haraway or Eve Shapiro have written regarding the use of new technologies and the interaction between human beings and such technologies, which have led to a new interpretation of the humanist disciplines and brought the *posthuman studies*. The pervasiveness of technology in contemporary society has reshaped identities, such as gender identities, and women writers who have access to new technologies (be them digital, informatics or reproductive technologies) could not ignore them when involved in the creative process. Murata Sayaka represents a great example of a Japanese woman writer whose use of technology reshapes her characters’ attitude towards everyday life and gives new value to bodily experience:

¹¹Hofstede states that “Masculinity stands for a society in which social gender roles are clearly distinct”, while “Femininity stands for a society in which social gender roles overlap” (Hofstede 297).

the *umihito* in *Satsujin shussan* are an example of living *cyborgs*, “hybrid(s) of machine and organism” (Haraway 222), where the machine “is not an it to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our process, an aspect of our embodiment” (Braidotti vi). I shall argue that the proposal of *cyborg*-like *umihito* in a novel written by a Japanese woman writer is of great importance for the feminist debate in Japan. Murata Sayaka represents a fresh and young voice in the contemporary Japanese literary scenario, and if the themes she touches upon are not completely new, let us hope that her literary works will contribute to the ongoing feminist debate in Japan.

References

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Anchor Books, 1986.
- Braidotti, Rosi (A). *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
- (B). *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex*. Verso, 2015.
- Iida, Yūko. “Murata Sayaka no genzai” in *Gakushi-kai kaihō*, vol. 922 (2017:1), pp. 68-71.
- Mohr, Dunja M. *Worlds apart?: dualism and transgression in contemporary female dystopias*. McFarland & Co., 2005.
- Fujiwara, Akira. “Disutopiashōsetsu, ukeru wake. Wakamonogajiketsuhiromerusendō, Otokogajinkōshikyū de shussan” in *Mainichi shinbun*, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20160607/dde/012/040/002000c>. Accessed June 11th, 2018.
- Haraway, Donna. “A Manifesto Cyborg. Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” in *Feminims/Postmodernism*. Linda Nicholson, edited by, Routledge, 1990, pp. 190-233.
- Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*. 2nd Edition, Sage, 2001.
- Horikawa, Yoshiyuki. “Konbini ningen ga miru fūkei” in *Weekly Tokyo Keizai*, No.6702, January 7th, 2017, pp. 168-169.
- Kano, Ayako. *Japanese Feminist Debates. A Century of Contention on Sex, Love and Labor*. University of Hawaii Press, 2016.

Levitas, Ruth. *The Concept of Utopia*. Syracuse University Press, 1990.

Mizuta, Noriko. "Women's Self-Representation and Transformation of the Body" in *Josai International Review*, Vol.1, No.1, 1995, pp.86-102.

Murata, Sayaka. "Satsujin shussan" in *Satsujin shussan*. Kōdansha bunkō, 2016, pp. 7-119.

Pizzini, Franca. "The medicalization of women's body" in *Archeologia woman*, <http://archeologia.women.it/user/cyberarchive/files/pizzini.htm>. Accessed June 11th, 2018.

Seaman, Amanda C. (A). *Writing Pregnancy in Low Fertility Japan*. University Of Hawaii Press, 2017.

--(B). "Stretching the Boundaries: Japanese Women's Detective Fiction" In *The Human Journal of Literature and Culture*, vol. 5, Crime Writing Special Issue, 2015, pp. 88-99.

Zack, Naomi. *Inclusive Feminism. A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2017.