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NATSUO KIRINO'S "OUT": THE RELEVANCE OF THE TITLE IN EXPLORING THE  
FEMALE EXPERIENCE IN TURN OF THE CENTURY JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Natsuo Kirino is a Japanese writer who focuses on the systematic oppression of women in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. Here, the topic of deliberation is Kirino's first detective fiction novel, *Out*, which explores the lives of four women working in a bento factory who commit a heinous crime. Putting these seemingly victimised women on the other side of the law while showing their struggles, Kirino complicates their position. This complication opens up many cracks, often invisible in the patriarchal Japanese society, like precarity of employment, domestic violence and systematic discrimination at the workplace. Women are forced to live outside society, and climbing the social and economic ladder is quite difficult, making them pariahs forever, which the title 'Out' alludes to. The paper hopes to explore the various ways these women are 'out' and their own quests to get 'out' of their precarious, lonely, oppressive lives. Along with exploring the various meanings of the title, the paper also seeks to relate these women's experiences with reality in Japan. Although the prospects are bleak, whether there is emancipation for the women on the fringes, in reality and fiction, is what the paper hopes to explore.

Keywords: Precarity, glass ceiling, feminism, detective fiction, female experience, male gaze, patriarchy

Introduction

Natsuo Kirino published her first detective fiction novel, *Out*, in Japanese in 1997. *Out* is the first in a series of three detective fiction novels, all of which explore the struggles of women in Japanese society. Usually, detective fiction is a whodunnit where chasing the elusive criminal makes up much of the plot. But Kirino uses the narrative technique of detective fiction to explore the female experience in Japanese society and the reasons that drive women to the path of crime, even murder. According to Kirino, "Being a woman in this society is mainly an anonymous existence," (Nakanishi) the experiences of men are the norm, and anything deviating from that falls outside the mainstream life. Sociologist Yuko Kawanishi explains that people "think that because Japan is an industrialised society, it is comparable to other G7 countries...If you look around Asia, the status of women goes up with educational achievement. That's not the case in Japan, where almost as many women complete university education as men." But at the same time, "50% of Japanese women are in full-time work, where they earn one-third less than men." (Kawanishi) Kirino recalls an encounter with a young man, who told her that "until he read *Out*, he had never realised that regular middle-aged women actually had a life." (Scalise) It is this

invisibility of women who live on the fringes of society that Kirino exposes through the act of crime and its aftermath. In that sense, it's a "whydunnit" (Nakanishi), we are introduced to the perpetrators early on, so the surprise element of finding the killer is thwarted head first. Instead, we gradually discover the various kinds of oppression in these women's lives, such as the precarious nature of employment, treatment of women as second-class citizens, glass ceiling at the workplace, sexual harassment, broken familial ties, and capitalism-driven poverty. According to Mina Quao, who aptly describes the motivation behind Kirino's writing, "Female authors such as Natsuo Kirino have given women a voice. They are no longer silent. Kirino generates integrated and authentic narratives of women struggling with the pain and burden imposed by the society around them. With these narratives, Kirino denounces the patriarchal fantasy of female criminality. It is not about love or sex. It is social. It is economic. It is political." (Quao, 120)

**Plot:** It tells the story of four friends who work night shifts at a boxed-lunch factory in a dreary suburb of Tokyo. One of the women kills her husband in a fit of anger upon learning that he has squandered all their meagre savings on gambling and prostitution. She then asks one of her friends to help her dispose of the body, and the other two friends also get involved and help scatter the cut-up parts of the body across different areas of Tokyo. The crime is discovered after someone finds one of the hastily disposed of body parts in a dustbin in a park in a residential area of Tokyo, and the police investigation begins implicating a mafia boss (Yakuza), who sets on taking revenge on the perpetrators who shut up his business, although through no fault of their own.

**The Female Experience in Turn of the Century Japan:** Japan is a traditionally patriarchal society despite technological advances, and Japanese women are still discriminated against daily. The headlines in Japan exemplify this: a former prime minister commenting that women "speak too much" (2020), Japan's ruling party decides to allow women to attend important meetings to "look, not talk" (2021), Tokyo Medical University accepted that they have been reducing entrance exam scores of women candidates for years (2018), are just a few examples. Japan ranked 121 among 153 countries, and in 2006, it ranked 80th among 115 countries in the Gender Gap Index data collected by the World Economic Forum. (Oi) These statistics are after the formation of the Gender Equality Bureau in 2001 after a lot of pressure from feminist activists in Japan. Kirino preempts this lack of change in the position of women since the struggles of the women in the novel still apply to current Japanese society. Of the four women, the youngest, Yayoi (31), the one who kills her husband, is the stereotype of the ideal housewife who devotes her life to serving her husband and raising her children while also supporting her husband financially with her part-time job at the bento factory. She endures physical violence and verbal abuse from her alcohol- and gambling-addicted husband but reaches a breaking point when she learns that her husband has floundered all their savings on gambling. When Kirino wrote *Out*, domestic violence was not a criminal offence and a fault of the perpetrator, but that of the woman. In 2001, the Prevention of Spousal Violence and Protection of Victims Act came into action.

Fifty-something Yoshie is a widow stuck caring for her bedridden mother-in-law and supporting her unhelpful daughter, who often scams her out of her hard-earned money. The burden of the husband's family often falls on the wife, who has to raise her children and fulfil her husband's needs, while also looking after the husband's parents. Usually, in Japanese society, the whole extended family lives together, increasing the financial, emotional and physical burden on the women.

The protagonist, Masako, is a 40-something suburban housewife who lives in a relatively better financial situation than the other coworkers. But her family situation is no better since all communication between Masako, her husband and their son stopped some time ago. Kirino explores her life in depth; Masako used to work at a credit union for more than 20 years, joining the company right out of high school. She is the typical case of discrimination at the workplace, as she witnesses male colleagues getting promoted while her place as a female employee diminishes. She feels humiliated by how women are treated in the company, which is common in the Japanese working culture. Women usually find employment as Office Lady (OL) in pink-collar jobs like secretaries, typists, and clerks, who often serve male employees during office parties and other gatherings. Masako also had to do this till she was considered too old even for that, she was forced to stay in the kitchen while younger female employees served the male employees. According to Orbaugh, "Women, as the object of the male gaze, experience their 'physical surface' - delimited by the parameters of their bodies- as

the determinant of meaning in the scopic economy.” (Orbaugh, 122) In a scopic economy, where the measure of a person is measured through their perception as an erotic object, how Masako fares in the workplace is solely dependent on her ability to ‘perform’ the required physical appearance. As Masako grows old, her ability to perform erotic femininity deplores, making her suffer the direct consequences of no longer being an object of the male gaze. This measure of women based on their attractiveness and other feminine performative qualities contributes to women not acquiring meaningful roles in the workplace. In Japan, only 0.8% of chief executives were women, compared to 10% and 23% in Britain and Sweden in 2008, respectively. (Penketh) Upon learning that a male colleague with similar qualifications got promoted and is earning much more money than her, she protests and gets bullied repeatedly; as a result, she leaves the company. After leaving the company, Masako is unable to find a similar job and is forced to take up the night shift at the bento factory, a job far beneath her capabilities. Anne Penketh calls this Japan’s ‘concrete glass ceiling’, where a woman is rarely allowed to break it, if at all. According to a survey, almost 23.3% of all company employees in 2002 comprised part-time workers, most of whom were housewives who worked without benefits or pensions as a cost-saving measure by companies. (Nakanishi, 4)

Kirino has portrayed Masako as an example of the discontent that women often experience within the hostile and limiting work life and the unfulfilling role of a housewife. Masako’s dissatisfaction can be compared to the “problem of no name” (Friedan, 16) that Betty Friedan proposed in *The Feminine Mystique*. When the novel begins, we see Masako in the bento factory parking lot, “I want to go home’...She didn’t know exactly what home it was she wanted to go to, certainly not the one she’d just left. But why didn’t she want to go back there? And where did she want to go? She felt lost.” (Kirino, 1) Here Masako is unhappy and does not feel at home anywhere, despite having a good house and a family to go to. She has everything that should make her happy, as advertised by the media and as expected of her, but none of it makes her happy, and she does not know why. What Friedan concluded from the American housewives of the 60s and 70s, “Women were blamed then for a lot of problems- not getting the kitchen sink white enough, not pressing the husband’s shirt smooth enough, the children’s bedwetting, the husband’s ulcers, their lack of orgasm. But there was no name for the problem that had nothing to do with husband, home, children, sex,” (Friedan, 16) can also be drawn from Masako’s situation. Her situation is complicated by the fact that she did not choose to be a housewife; she was a working woman who was exploited and then forced to leave her job. So, here we know why she is unhappy because it becomes clear that she is a woman of intellect and empathy. The other three women come to her when they need help, trust her judgement and rely on her decisions. She not only plans the disposal of the body of Yayoi’s husband but also makes it a business with Yoshie when the opportunity comes, without the police knowing anything. So, when Yayoi comes to her asking for help, Masako does not hesitate much before jumping into the ensuing mess of committing a crime.

**Women on the ‘Out’-side:** Kirino has chosen the title carefully, as it describes the discrimination women experience and how Kirino sees and portrays them. First, **all these women are outside mainstream society** in one way or another. According to Nakanishi,

“The female characters are automatically assigned to the role of outsiders in the enclaves of male power that dominates Japanese society...Kirino’s women are individuals who are socially marginalized, excluded from the ‘urban’ centres of power, wealth and influence by the attitudes, actions and absences of men.” We see that every single man in these women’s lives is either dead, a recluse or abusive. In Japanese society, a woman’s worth is determined by how well-functioning her family is, basically on the male members of the family being either in education, employment or training. The two phenomena of NEET (not in education, employment or training) and *hikikomori* (someone, usually a young man, who does not go out of his room/house ever) are rapidly plaguing Japanese society, Masako’s husband and son become more reclusive with each passing day. Masako is left alone, questioning her reasons for returning home each day. Nakanishi reasons out Masako and later Yoshie’s decision to help Yayoi, “The women, on finding themselves unable to count on any assistance from the male figures in their lives or Japanese law or society, club together to help each other,” the only point of solidarity between them being that they all live on the fringes of the society.

Second, **these women are outside the male gaze**. Although Kirino uses the detective fiction genre, she subverts two most frequently used traditional aspects of detective fiction: the whodunnit, and the stereotypical objectification of the female characters. According to Amanda Seaman, "Women...are seen as potentially dangerous, and the plots of...detective fiction in the 1920s and 30s America...revolve around the subjugation of female agency and desire." (Seaman) These women were portrayed as mysterious femme fatales who ensnare men into their traps, often sexualising themselves. Mina Quao illustrates this point further, "Men with their phallic pistols and physicality as symbols of masculinity, are always pursuers. In contrast, women are shown to be impressionable, hysterical and eventually the evil initiators." (Quao, 117) This binary representation of the feminine and the criminal is a stereotype present in both fiction and reality. But Kirino turns this stereotype on its head by removing the male gaze from her novels. These women are portrayed as devoid of physical characteristics that might define their sexuality; for example, Yayoi is described as conventionally good-looking only twice and shown as a woman who did what she needed to do to survive the abuse of her husband. Lisa Duggan illustrates this point, "Such narratives which rationalize female criminality and sexuality worked to depoliticize, trivialize and marginalize the aspirations of women for political equality, economic autonomy and alternative domesticities." (Quao, 118) Masako is described as a woman of no excesses multiple times throughout the novel. First, Kuniko describes her as "one of those scrawny trees at Christmas: her skinny shape, the slightly dark skin, the piercing eyes, the thin lips and narrow nose- no excess anywhere," (Kirino, 16) Miyamori, the half-Japanese half-Brazilian immigrant worker, describes her face as "stripped of any excess." (Kirino, 282) Similarly, Kirino describes Yayoi as an innocent-looking but sinister housewife; nowhere does her physical beauty become a plot point or give her any leverage in the story. Even Anna, the prostitute of Kabuki-Cho, is portrayed as a strong-headed girl who wants to earn enough money to return to China, her country. So, the women of Kirino are 'out' of the male gaze; Kirino liberates them and gives each of them stories based on their personal ambitions, which range from wanting an easier life, economic security, familial security and freedom from oppression. These women are left to be and seen as themselves, as their actions and not their bodies.

Third, **Kirino also is out** of the society that perceives women as weak and soft. By writing about women who are culpable for their actions despite the oppression they face, Kirino breaks the dichotomy of male/female, active/passive or subject/object. Kirino's women are not mere beings to whom things are done, but they are the doers as Orbaugh describes the dichotomy, "Women in a patriarchal social economy constantly experience themselves as objects of the gaze, the speech, the judgement, the violence of men." (Orbaugh, 123) So, when Kirino describes the yearning to escape in Masako, when she agrees to help Yayoi is what can be called the result of her own experience as a female forced to make her peace with the injustice she faced at her job due to her position as an older woman who has no physical qualities to offer to the patriarchal nature of the workplace. Masako finds it hard to get used to and reconcile her role as a woman, a passive object, the one to whom things are done. That awareness creates the yearning to be 'out' in her, which makes her help Yayoi. Kirino describes her decision: "...there is a certain kind of freedom in being completely 'out'. If you go out one exit, there's another door, and if you open that, you don't know what awaits you." (Scalise) The trajectory of Masako's character becomes clear, like her desire to go home and not having a home to go to; the idea of home is a mental state, a state of freedom which she yearns for, which one hopes she achieves at the end of the novel.

After the publication of *Out* in Japan, Kirino faced harsh criticism from the (mostly) male readers. Kirino describes their reaction, "Men were very shocked that a wife could kill her husband. Japanese men felt so threatened by it. They also never imagined that a woman could write such an aggressive novel. The most shocking part of *Out* for a lot of people is that it's written by a married woman who has a family and a child. If the book was written by a man, people wouldn't be as surprised, and they'd look at it as fiction. But because a woman wrote it, and its realistic to a certain degree, people were surprised." (IndieBound) Bringing back Orbaugh's dichotomy, and expanding it, Kirino as a woman is historically a passive object. For her, the very fact of writing means she is challenging the patriarchal setup since women traditionally are not allowed to write, especially "against a background of patriarchal control." Kirino also put herself outside the patriarchal purview by writing about women who take an active part in their lives, generating shock value in her writing.

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## Conclusion

By keeping her women characters out of the male gaze, Kirino gives them a certain amount of individuality and personal agency instead of ending up as just statistics (in the social class they belong to, people usually do). These women are individuals, not just victims or villains in the lives of men around them; Kirino complicates how we see them, hence pulling them away from anonymity. These individuals suffer from a precariousness brought on by commodification, capitalism, sexual discrimination and a lack of education. According to Makoto, “the reserves that people were once able to count on- whether savings in the bank, families one could turn to in times of need, or educational credentials- are drying up,” (Allison, 48) is also the case with the characters of *Out*, none of the women has any kind of security net to fall back on in times of need. Most of the time, it is women helping each other, usually Masako, who is better off than the other three. Not only are these women fighting their individual battles, from endless caregiving and financial issues to breaking the family unit, but they are also together in a battle against the society that wants to keep them in their places and exploit them. These people form what Anne Allison calls the Precariat, a term used for a class of people whose employment and income are insecure. Allison explains: “Certain workers are more prone to belong to the precariat...those without post-secondary education and those who come from households that are a single parent and working-class (or working poor).” (Allison, 20) All the characters in the novel belong to this category, the precariat, thus throwing them outside society, meanwhile closing the door to any kind of economic security and freedom whatsoever. Given Japanese society’s attitude towards women, it is no surprise that there are barely any women in the public sphere. Only 10% of Japanese MPs are women, accounting for one of the lowest in the world: merely 9% of lawyers and 8% of accountants are women. Women have the least say in matters related to childcare, domestic violence, family policy and equal employment, for the lack of women in decision-making bodies also affects women everywhere in the country, be it housewives, career women, part-timers, or unskilled workers, as we witness in the novel. Not that there are no efforts to such ends, Shinzo Abe introduced the concept of ‘Womenomics’, a set of economic reforms aimed at pulling Japan out of its stagnant economy. It aimed to close “the gender employment gap’ and promote the better utilization of human capital through workplace equality.” (Crawford)

The problem, as Orbaugh mentioned earlier, is that these plans only tend to work within the system where women are still second-class citizens. It's not a surprise to learn that the goals set for Womenomics were nowhere near completion in 2020, the year they aimed at, with more women in the precarious workforce than before. (Crawford) These reforms do not work because they do not want to break the male/female dichotomy, they merely try to gratify the complaints and protests with temporary fixes, but as soon as these fixes are applied, we begin to see the loopholes and how ineffective they are. According to Hemmann, subverting the male/female dichotomy allows women certain freedom, but these temporary subversions do not emancipate women in the long run, as we see in the novel. Despite Masako leaving Japan to achieve actual freedom, we see those who left behind falling back into the oppressive system. Yoshie and Yayoi are still trapped, Kuniko paid the price heavily with her death, and the dichotomy persists stronger than ever. Nothing changes.

But Japanese women do not give up hope after all; it is naive to expect to change a system that has benefited the Japanese economy and has elevated Japan to the status of a developed nation. It has been more than 75 years since the current system of patriarchal work culture and social life was established in Japan after the fateful second world war. Mizuho Fukushima is the leader of Japan’s opposition, the Social Democratic Party, and a women's rights activist. Her campaigns against sexual harassment, domestic abuse, better maternity and child care are joined by women in good numbers. She says the attitude of women is changing towards themselves. Not long ago, women were with men in believing that their place belonged in the home, but now more women are beginning to understand the inherent misogyny in this thought. She says, “Single and childless women in their thirties now take pride in a career and a disposable income.” Ms Fukushima hopes the current generation won’t tolerate the inequality, and she can already see it happening. Changes in bureaucracy, law and public policy will undoubtedly take time, but a drastic change in attitude is more important for women to realise that they do not have to get the short end of the stick.

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