

# Women Rocking the Boat

## A Philosophy of the Sexed Body and Self-Identity

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In the course of preparing a contribution on modern Japanese women philosophers for a forthcoming *Sourcebook of Japanese Philosophy*, I found the relation between self-identity and the body to run through the literature like a bright thread. The argument was twofold: on the one hand, women need to be liberated as *human beings*; and on the other, women need to be liberated as *women*, that is to say, not freed from their sex but freed precisely as sexed female persons. The corollary to this latter is that men, too, need to be liberated as sexed male persons. On further reflection, it struck me that Nishida Kitarō's conceptual framework of the "concrete universal"—the interpenetration of the particular and the universal—offered a way to unify these two sides of the argument.

To work this out in further detail, I propose to begin by looking at the kinds of questions raised by Japanese women philosophers, in particular, by Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō. Next, brief mention will be made of visiting Dōgen's view on women's ability to attain enlightenment in order to show the role Zen Buddhism might play in the feminist inquiry. I will then turn to Nishida's conceptual framework and its application to women's self-identity. I will follow this by drawing attention to certain remarks by D. T. Suzuki that may be related to the question of sexual desire. I conclude with a glance at the "structure of discrimination" for-

mulated by Sakaguchi Fumi, a contemporary philosopher. Attempts to bring Japanese women philosophers into direct conversation with their male counterparts, as I shall do here, remain marginalized in Japanese academic circles, but this encounter with the “other,” the “different,” and the “neglected” is one we can no longer afford to pass over.

### THE BODY, THE FEMALE BODY, THE FEMALE SEX

To understand the social plight of women over the past one hundred to one and hundred fifty years, we need to take a broad, if somewhat simplistic, historical perspective. During the samurai culture of the Middle Ages, women, the physically weaker sex, gradually became subservient to men. This attitude was codified in laws and social mores, which in turn severely restricted women’s rights until 1945, when, in the wake of the end of the Pacific War and the surrender of the Japanese army, a sweeping social change took place. But already at the turn of the twentieth century Japanese women had begun to develop a reasoned demand for liberation in opposition to the time-honored but oppressive social customs and cultural assumptions that had left them for centuries without a voice.

In the following, I will focus on two women, Yosano Akiko (1878–1942, eight years junior to Nishida and D. T. Suzuki) and Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971, roughly contemporary to Tanabe Hajime). Yosano, a renowned poet, contributed a poem entitled “Rambling Thoughts” to the inaugural issue of 青鞜 *Seitō*, a journal begun in September 1911 under the editorship of Raichō and like-minded colleagues and soon to become synonymous with the women’s liberation movement in Japan. The opening stanza of Yosano’s poem reads:

The day the mountains move has come.  
 Or so I say, though no one will believe me.  
 The mountains were merely asleep for a while.  
 But in ages past, they had moved, as if they were on fire.  
 If you don’t believe this, that’s fine with me.  
 All I ask is that you believe this and only this.

That at this very moment, women are awakening from their deep slumber. (CRAIG 2006, 149–50)

Inspired by Yosano's generous support of their endeavor, Raichō penned her celebrated manifesto for the same issue, named after its opening sentence:

In the beginning, woman was truly the sun. An authentic person.  
Now she is the moon, a wan and sickly moon, dependent on  
another, reflecting another's brilliance.  
*Seitō* herewith announces its birth.  
Created by the brains and hands of Japanese women today, it  
raises its cry like a newborn child.... (CRAIG 2006, 157)

This group of women initiated a movement to break away from the yoke of feudalistic morality and value systems embodied in *The Great Learning for Women (Onna-daigaku 女大学, 1710)*.<sup>1</sup> Yosano and Hiratsuka set their pens to the service of stirring the consciousness of women not only to the injustices of their plight but also to their potential for free individuality. Yosano emphasized the education of women, while Hiratsuka focused on securing civil rights and citizenship for women. As they labored for an improvement in women's social status, they found that they had to first reclaim their self-identity *and* their "body," which had become mere possessions of men in the traditional patriarchy.

For example, in questioning the traditional value ascribed to female chastity, Raichō wrote in 1916, already forty years after Japan had begun to rebuild itself as a modern nation:

Japanese women had long been a possession of men, and this idea was cultivated through the ages so that chastity has become an instinct for women. The emotion to overemphasize women's unconditional chastity is deeply and blindly rooted in the sentiment of women, who had been subjected to the influences of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Bushidō, the warrior ethics. And this sentiment is still strongly at work. (HIRATSUKA 1916, 164)

Women thinkers were acutely aware that they had to rethink the

1. This booklet on female ethics is attributed to Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714).

assumptions behind even such basic questions as the right to chastity, and to unveil prevalent attitudes as social and historical “constructions.” In their effort to dismantle traditional “female morality” and the ideal of “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母), they exposed such modes of thought as convenient for men and foundational for a male-dominated society. In order to free themselves from established social conventions and an oppressive “patriarchal family system,” they soon realized that it was not enough to secure their independence as persons. Some measure of financial security was also indispensable. Physical freedom and economic freedom went hand in hand for them, as it does to this day. As a matter of course, some women were led to ask what kind of social system would best serve women’s reality and needs. Many intellectuals among them, Yamakawa Kikue (1890–1980), became advocates of socialism as a way to guarantee humane protection to working women and teenage “mill girls.”

Yosano Akiko, a gifted poet and social critic, was a devoted wife and mother to eleven children, but held on to her firm conviction that a woman is a human being first and foremost, and that women were no less gifted than men, *if properly educated and trained*. Once awakened to their potential, she argued, women should have equal access to higher education, a profession, and financial independence.<sup>2</sup> Concerning her experience of becoming a mother, she wrote:

It was not an absolute event in my life. I am a mother, but I am also the wife of a man, a friend to my friends, a member of the global human race, and a Japanese subject. I’m also a human being, who engages in thinking, composes poetry, writes manuscripts, provides clothes and food [to my family], and carries out all sorts of mental and physical activities. I make it a point of concentrating wholeheartedly on whatever task I’m performing at any given moment for as long as time permits. (Yosano 1916, YAZ 15:199)

In contrast, Hiratsuka Raichō struggled to meet the challenges that

2. Yosano found a woman after her own heart in Olive Schreiner (1855–1920) of South Africa, who argued for women’s equal capacity for physical labor. A Japanese translation of Schreiner’s *Women and Work* (1911) was published in 1914.

threatened her self-identity as a reflective writer. Becoming pregnant meant a change of lifestyle. She had entered the “life of love” voluntarily, having fallen in love with a younger painter, Okumura Hiroshi. In defiance of Japanese social conventions at the time, she left her parental household and moved in with him. She writes of her life of love:

I used to be biased against the life of women as members of the female “sex” and felt hatred and contempt for men as members of the male sex. Clearly this blocked my way to a correct understanding of women’s conditions and prevented me from formulating women’s issues in a helpful manner....

For a long time “romantic love” meant no more to me than a strong curiosity about the opposite sex.... How could I have known that this curiosity was the harbinger of true feelings of love? ...Romantic love became a solemn and significant question for me. I had to open a totally different eye to reexamine it. I had to think hard about the real significance and value of women’s life as a woman who engages in the life of love.... And in this process, I came to realize that it was necessary *to liberate women not only as human persons but also as sexed women*. This was a brand new philosophical problem for me to face.....

Through the last two years of communal living with O, my eyes have been gradually opened as a mature integrated woman. But at the same time, this life of love got in conflict with my innermost life—my cry for work, a voice of my soul that prefers solitude. And now I’m pregnant.... (HIRATSUKA 1915A, 39–41; emphasis added)

Through the experience of pregnancy, Raichō came to see motherhood as the highest and most sacred role for a woman as a sexed body, and argued that mothers should be protected by the state.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of Yosano fault her for an overly idealistic affirmation of the power of individuals and an optimistic confidence in women to become financially independent, while critics of Raichō complained that she had overly privileged motherhood.

3. Raichō embraced the philosophical position of the Swedish thinker, Ellen Key (1849–1926), who represented the Scandinavian sense of independence of women and socialized welfare.

Am I a human being first and foremost, or am I a human being as a female body?” This is an ongoing question for many woman. A friend of mine, who last year underwent her first pregnancy and a complicated difficult delivery, confided in me that “It was the most intensely physical experience I had ever gone through. For a long time I was totally reduced to my ‘body.’ There is no denying that such an experience is a very real (and fundamental) part of the human condition for women.

## DŌGEN ON ENLIGHTENMENT AND WOMEN

Zen Buddhism has advocated a gender neutral universal view on women in terms of their ability to attain enlightenment. Dōgen (1200–1253) maintained that enlightenment did not have anything to do with whether the person who attains it is a man or a woman (Dōgen 1231, 257).<sup>4</sup> In honor of his female disciples, he composed a sermon in which he specifically referred to female (Chinese) Chan masters whose enlightenment had been officially recognized and publicly respected. His view is clearly *gender-free* and universal:

What is so special about being born a man? The sky [*kokū* 虚空] is the sky, the four elements<sup>5</sup> are the four elements, and the five *skandhas*<sup>6</sup> are the five *skandha*. The same is true for a woman. Those who attain enlightenment attain enlightenment. Do not make an issue of whether the person enlightened is a man or a woman. This is the most wondrous law of the Buddhist path.<sup>7</sup> (DŌGEN 1239, 117)

Raichō was herself a student of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, and her *kenshō* 見性 experience, authenticated on two separate occasions by two differ-

4. The original reads: 仏法を会すること、男女貴賤をえらぶべからずときこゆ。

5. S. *Mahā-bhūta*: earth 地, water 水, fire 火, and wind 風 (or air).

6. They are *rūpa* 色 (body, matter), *vedanā* 受 (senses), *saṃjñā* 想 (mental representations), *saṃskāra* 行 (will, impulse), and *viññāna* 識 (cognition, perception, consciousness) that make up every single individual person.

7. The original reads: 男兒なにをもてか貴ならん。虚空は虚空なり。四大は四大なり、五蘊は五蘊なり。女流もまたかくのごとし、得道はいづれも得道す。ただし、いづれも得法を敬重(きょうじゅう)すべし、男女を論ずることなかれ。これ仏道極妙の法則なり。

ent masters, gave her the spiritual freedom and confidence as a “person of no fixed rank” to take unconventional actions, first in her twenties, and later as a lifelong engaged social activist. Zen teaching was a deep part of her self-identity. As she grew into a mature woman capable of romantic love, her life as a sexed woman at first posed a spiritual conflict. Eventually she was able to rise above the problem and shift her thought from the universal recognition of woman as the “original face” to the particular, “sexed,” concrete person. In all of this, she was sustained by the deep spiritual awareness to which Zen had led her.

### NISHIDA’S DIALECTICAL PHILOSOPHY AS A BRIDGE

Nishida’s philosophical framework with its dialectical interpenetration of the particular and the universal suggests a way to unify the two approaches to the self-identity of women (and men, for that matter), namely, as a human person and as a sexed woman. To paraphrase Nishida’s core insight here, *the more particular a thing is, the more universal it is*. It could be argued that this manner of logical formulation has its roots in the Buddhist logic of the coexistence of *shabetsu* 差別 (individual differences) and *byōdō* 平等 (universal identity), or in the mutual non-hindrance of concrete individuals in the world, as formulated in the Huayan doctrine of *jijimuge hokkai* 事事無礙法界. It is a mode of existence my mentor, Raimon Panikkar, would call “inter-independence.”<sup>8</sup>

In his 1917 essay on “What Does it Mean to ‘be Japanese?’” Nishida urged the Japanese people to recognize the “universal” dimension of Japanese culture, insisting that the Japanese people should strive with confidence to continue to create their own culture and not cut its development short. He argued that the more fully and uniquely the Japanese

8. In the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, especially in Huayan, the highest perception of reality is affirmed as a state in which every single individual exists in a harmony that does not hinder any other individual. The Huayan doctrine sets out four steps here: “the dharma realm of things (or facts)” (*ji hokkai* 事法界), “principle” (*ri hokkai* 理法界), “the interpenetration of the principle and individuals” (*riji hokkai* 理事法界), and finally, the world of the interpenetration of concrete things (or facts)” (*jijimuge hokkai* 事事無礙法界).

elaborate their culture (in the direction of particularity), the more universal appeal it will have for non-Japanese and the more it will contribute to the rich symphony of cultures around the world. To make sense of Nishida's point we need only imagine what would happen were Japan to lose its distinct characteristics and become a carbon copy of the United States of America or some other country in Europe or Asia. Not only would the Japanese tourist industry dry up in no time, the contribution it could make to the global community would be dramatically reduced.

In this essay Nishida was also criticizing a trend that had begun to gain momentum in Japan at the time, namely, the insistence on an exclusive uniqueness of Japanese culture that it defied real understanding by foreigners. Implicit in this sort of chauvinistic, narcissistic, and closed view of Japanese culture was the sense of superiority of Japanese culture. Wary of cultural narcissism, Nishida advanced the view that for a particular culture to have a universal appeal, it must become "public" property and cease to be the mere possession of a specific folk, country, or race. In other words, genuine culture must discard its "ego" and self-complacency to take its place openly in the wider world.

This insight into the interpenetrating relationship of the particular and the universal runs deep in Nishida's thinking and was crucial in his formulation of philosophical ideas such as "place" (*basho*), the "dialectical world," "action-intuition," and "absolutely contradictory self-identity."

#### NISHIDA'S PHILOSOPHY AND WOMEN'S SELF-IDENTITY

Let us now see what happens if we apply Nishida's logical-ontological framework to the issue of women's self-identity as typified in the writings of Yosano and Raichō. We may suggest the following proposition: the more fully a woman embraces her life as a sexed female, that is, the more fully she affirms herself as a sexed being, the more fully she lives her life as a human being. (Given our current social debate over sexual identity, we may even broaden this to read: the more one embraces one's own sexual orientation and leads a fulfilling life, the more truly one lives as a human being.)

Insofar as a woman goes through pregnancy, delivery, and nursing by



giving herself totally at each step of the way without resistance or resentment, she is fully alive as a human person. What more perfectly harmonious image than a loving mother nursing her baby! No wonder mother Mary and the infant Jesus have played such a central role in Christian iconography. When a woman nurtures her potential as a mother (or as care-giver, passionate intellectual, artist, or whatever), she is reaching down to the depths of her humanity and touching something more universal than the abstract notion of the person.

This was in fact Raichō's own experience. Agonizing over the two contradicting forces within her—an egoistic, self-preserving instinct and an altruistic, maternal instinct—she came to realize the more inclusive dimension of love. Romantic love opened up her to a wider vista of altruistic love. She notes the gradual change that took place after she became a mother:

I affirmed my romantic love initially in order to assert my self-identity and develop it. But love rooted in the self-assertion and self-development turned out to be a gateway into the love of others, the other side of life. In no time, the whole panorama of love of the other unfolded in front of me, first through the love I bore my lover, and then through my love for my child. I ended up experiencing all sorts of contradictory things. But I can no longer dismiss them as merely "life's contradictions." I have rather come to think of them as gateways that open out into a wider, larger, and deeper life. And the real harmonization of these two orientations may well be the subtle and ultimate flavor of life. (HIRATSUKA 1917, 274–5)

Following Yosano's lead, we may say that the more a woman fulfills her potential as a human being, the richer her contribution will be as a mother, a wife, a female friend, a female writer, and so forth. Interestingly, Yosano's description of herself as someone constantly carrying out multiple tasks seems to resonate with Nishida's dialectical vision of the self-in-the-world in its various ontological aspects as one and many. Yosano comments:

I do not live by my maternal instinct alone. Even when I appear to be exercising those instincts, I am conscious of the activities I am sacrificing—they are all present and revolving around me, as if an infinite

number of stars move around the one star that I'm currently gazing at.... It would take a great number of words to name all the activities that occupy my life: motherhood, friendship, wife, work, art, country, world.... What would be the point to naming them all? The fact is, these centers are all relative and numerous, coming and going continually. My life is one dynamic flux.... (YOSANO 1916, 199–200)

By adopting the Nishida's interpretation of the "concrete universal," the seemingly contradicting "feminine" and the "human" aspects of women's self-identity are brought into deeper unity. In fact, the women philosophers themselves who engaged in the debate agreed in the end that they were all working towards that same goal.

#### D. T. SUZUKI'S RADICAL MAHĀYĀNA POSITION REGARDING SEXUALITY

If Nishida's aim was to embrace humanity, while remaining fully rooted in gender-specific reality, D. T. Suzuki emerges as one of the most "gender-inclusive" universal thinkers. Unlike Nishida, who was comfortable with theoretical speculation, Suzuki's philosophical interests were always tied to what was for him most immediate and concrete. This includes the question of sexuality and the nature of *libido*. The freedom to tackle these thorny subjects came from the depth of a *satori* experience that purified him of fixed and "self-centered" views of human conditions and helped him address these questions afresh.

For Suzuki, sexual desire is something of original beauty. He writes:

Precisely because we *are* the body, we have the opportunity to give birth to beautiful things. Consider, for instance, puppy love between young lovers, or the feeling of oneness shared by a seasoned aged couple. These are the kinds of experiences reserved only for human beings. Romantic love by definition has a physical foundation, but for the young ones in love, this physical foundation is not within their purview. Theirs is a beautiful dream-like world. Again, the emotional bonding that grows between husband and wife is characterized by incomparable sense of inseparability so much so that when one of the partners dies the other often follows. This is why it is said that "A lotus

flower, even though growing out of mud, blooms beautifully.” But actually, what is “beautiful” does not have its existence in the emotion of beautiful but in what gives rise to that emotion. To put it plainly, a beautiful thing does not come into being by having something dirty as its source. A beautiful thing has something beautiful at its depth and simply mirrors its beauty. A “dirty” thing gets purified by mirroring its source. A thing becomes “dirty” only when severed from its source. (SUZUKI 1948, 525)

Suzuki points out that sexual desire is an integral part of the self-identity of the mature human person. This obvious fact is often missing from philosophical discussions of personal “authenticity,” and yet it is most delightfully depicted in the romantic pastoral novel of *Daphnis and Chloë*, where awareness of sexual desire was a sign of the maturity of the protagonists as unique individual persons endowed with self-consciousness.

Suzuki interprets “thirst” (be it *trṣṇā*, *tanhā*, sexual desire, or *libido*), considered by Buddhism to be one of the three ills, in radically Mahāyāna fashion, identifying it as the principle that preserves the human species, and in fact, the principle that gives rise to the entire universe. “Thirst” is the very “first principle of making things come into existence,” says Suzuki. Echoing the opening line of the Gospel of John he writes:

In the beginning was *trṣṇā*. It wills to have a form in order to express itself, which means to assert itself. In other words, when it asserts itself it takes form. As *trṣṇā* is inexhaustible, the forms it takes are infinitely varied. *Trṣṇā* wants to see and we have eyes; it wants to hear and we have ears; it wants to jump and we have the deer, the rabbit, and other animals of this order; it wants to fly and we have birds of all kinds; it wants to swim and we have fish wherever there are waters; it wants to bloom and we have flowers; it wants to shine and we have stars; it wants to have a realm of heavenly bodies and we have galaxies<sup>9</sup>; and so on. *Trṣṇā* is the creator of the universe. (Suzuki 2002B, 106)

Suzuki also sees concealed in this dynamic life-force that drives the universe a spiritual secret, namely, there is a self-transcending (or self-

9. In the original English, “astronomy.”

negating) reality inherent in *tr̥ṣṇā* that transforms it into great compassion. Tracing the development of the Mahāyāna idea, he writes:

All that *tr̥ṣṇā* could do for itself was to make it turn to itself, to purify itself from all its encumbrances and defilements, by means of transcendental knowledge (*prajñā*). The later Buddhists then let *tr̥ṣṇā* work on its own way without being impeded by anything else. *Tr̥ṣṇā* or “thirst” or “craving” then comes to be known as *mahākaruṇā*, or “absolute compassion,” which they consider the essence of Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood. (SUZUKI 2002B, III)

Because of the negation inherent in thirst, “Buddhist training consists in transforming *tr̥ṣṇā* (*tanhā*) into *karuṇā*, ego-centered love into something universal, *eros* into *agapē*” (SUZUKI 2002A, 63). Suzuki not only affirms and warmly embraces human sexuality, it also purifies it. The kōan *bashi shōan* 婆子燒庵—the old woman setting fire to the hut where she had allowed a practicing Chan monk to live and whom she had provided with food for over two decades—is to the point here.

Suzuki’s view stresses the spiritual potential of men and women, young and old. He was a *gender-inclusive* thinker who believed in each person’s ability to be transformed. A similar Mahāyāna affirmation of sexuality is found in Raichō’s essay on “The True Value of Virginity”:

Because virginity is an integral part of the sexual life of a woman, of her station in life, and of her level of maturity, it is a highly personal matter.... From a wider perspective the loss of virginity for a woman means achieving a fuller, healthier development of her sexual life beyond the virginal state, one that further enriches the whole of life and increases her vitality. (HIRATSUKA 1915B, 58)

## OPENING UP THE DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

Sakaguchi Fumi (1933– ), an academic philosopher, recalls the blatant gender discrimination she had to persevere when she was an undergraduate student in the early 1950s:

Not only by parents and teachers but also by society at large the opin-

ion was voiced loud and clear that women utterly lacked ability and creativity in the area of cultural and scholarly pursuits, and that women had no leadership capability or intellectual judgment. Even when this opinion was not voiced, it lingered on tacitly in everyone's mind as an "indisputable fact." (SAKAGUCHI 1996, 4-5)<sup>10</sup>

Reflections on her experience led her to formulate a "structure of discrimination" that is almost always one-sided, a kind of "wall of discrimination" that is "visible" only from the side of those who are discriminated against:

Those who discriminate are almost always unaware of the fact. But for those who are being discriminated against, this lack of awareness on the part of the discriminators is terribly and undeniably real, like a solid and impenetrable wall or a dagger poised over at one's chest. The relationship between the two is completely *asymmetrical*, as I believe it is in all cases of discriminations.

What makes it worse is that the voice of discriminator echoes around inside the minds of the victimized, since both have grown up and live in the same culture and society... As long as one turns a blind eye to the material, social, and psychological conditions that influence human beings, it is easy to attribute all sorts of "incapacities" to women and think of them as belonging to the "essential reality" of women. There is also a certain convenience for the discriminator to have their "inferior" near at hand....

The problems of discrimination for reasons of race or class or caste are the same one women encounter... (SAKAGUCHI 1996, 5-6)

While working on her doctoral studies at the University of Munich, Sakaguchi lived in Europe for several years and became familiar with its spiritual heritage. She came to see that more often than not women have an easier time of transcending cultural differences than men do, and that these barriers pose less a problem than gender barriers do:

In fact, many women... have found a way to transcend the barriers

10. Sakaguchi championed in the study of European Christian thinkers, and made a significant contribution to Medieval European Studies at Tōhoku University, from which she retired in 1996.

that divide East and West. I suppose the reason is that the cultural divide between East and West is not so great as the divide that runs through a sexist culture, penetrating to the very concrete core of our own being and devastating the lives of women as “professionals” and as “private persons.” It is a barrier that is visible only to women, because women have not been given the chance to voice their real experiences. *In the past, women tended to look at themselves through the eyes of men, filtering their image of themselves through literature and philosophies created by men.* The situation is gradually changing, but the kind of pain... is still there for many professional women. (SAKAGUCHI 1996, 7; emphasis added)

Sakaguchi’s comment is well taken in contrast to Simone de Beauvoir’s laments over the “second sex.” Beauvoir clearly viewed herself from the male perspective, a bias that has been radically overturned in the intervening years but whose vestiges are still worth attending to.

In any case, my study of Japanese women thinkers has convinced me that they not only rocked the philosophical boat, they planted the seeds of a new brand of self-reflection in Japan whose fruits have yet to be fully harvested in our own day.

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 SDZ 『鈴木大拙全集』 [Complete works of Suzuki Daisetz] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968-1971), 32 volumes.  
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