

When her home is no longer a home: *Out* by Natsuo Kirino

“The role of a writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.” (Anais Nin)¹

“You may wonder why the story needs to go that far. But unless it went that far, you wouldn't know that it was that far.” (Yoko Sano)²

1. Hardboiled women in crime stories

Detective dramas often begin with the scene of a dead body, more often than not, that of a young woman, which is then examined and discussed. The language used to describe the dead body is medical and legal, reminding the audience that the purpose of our looking is to find the murderer, and nothing more. Naturally, the sight of a dead body evokes in viewers fear, disgust and even eroticism. But, of course, such emotions and sensations should not surface, since we are engaged in a mission to uncover the truth. In this context hardboiled protagonists, who maintain distance and demonstrate emotional detachment, play a functional role in positioning the audience. They offer a guilt-free and therefore safe standpoint that viewers can automatically take as their own. When the detecting protagonist is a woman, this function is even more effective.

One example is the mid-90's BBC TV series *Silent Witness*.³ Sam Ryan, a pathologist played by Amanda Burton, examines stomach contents and cuts open skulls without showing any emotion. Throughout these scenes, she demonstrates her faultless work ethic and professionalism. Despite the grisly nature of the view, we, the audience, feel almost comfortable by her side, as we listen to her controlled, stoic voice when she records the autopsy procedure. Her Scottish accent adds an earthly and even ritualistic air, as if she were a medium who conveys the voice of the Truth, which includes not just who's done it, but about the life of the deceased inscribed on the body. Knowing that she has already overcome the fear of touching the dead body in the names of science and justice, we can also overcome our squeamishness and go through the autopsy along with her. Her gaze implements a fixed distance for the audience, controlling the camera eye and preventing it from sexualizing the dead body.

Working with the dead body, Sam Ryan appeals to viewers as spontaneous and caring, or as one may put it, motherly. The same thing can be said about the younger woman who replaces her in the later series. Despite what they do, they never look invasive. Being described as motherly is, however, often a risky business for a woman. It not only makes her seem a self-effacing giver, it also associates her with what Julia Kristeva calls “abjection,” or the “margins of the body.”⁴ While women’s biological particularities, such as birth and menstruation, have been used to create this association, their social condition, such as caregiving for infants, the elderly and the sick, validate and reinforce it. The character setting of Sam Ryan has nothing to do with these things, and yet viewers cannot dissociate her from the set of meanings she carries on her gendered body. By the same token, this semiotic association between women and abjection has a stake in normalizing the relentless parade of women in crime stories who are not just killed, but covered with blood, raped, tortured and dismembered. This is pervasive to the extent that a victimized woman’s body is arguably formulaic not only to the “noir thriller” genre but also the detective drama in general both on TV and in films.⁵

The function of a hardboiled woman protagonist, like Sam Ryan, in this formula is twofold; she is not simply a stronger, wiser and alive counterpart of the dead woman, but the other side of the same coin. While her knowledge of fear and abjection defines and highlights her place as a gamekeeper, at the same time she is a woman who could be on the other side (the weak, the powerless) with just a flip of a coin. The imagined vulnerability attached to her being a woman is the subterranean element that makes her role particularly attractive. On the one hand she is an aspirational hero, and on the other, she is imagined to be somehow vulnerable. She is unmarried, childless and dedicated to a cause, almost like a hardboiled detecting hero, but importantly, not quite so.⁶ She is placed outside the assumed normality of womanhood, and yet, that *normal* woman is merely an ideological construct, that is, a phantom woman who does not exist.⁷

A hardboiled woman protagonist (or a “fighting girl”) is found in a wide range of contemporary popular media, including TV dramas, films, animations and computer games.⁸ In this essay I discuss a written text – a crime story by Japanese novelist Natsuo Kirino (b. 1951). There are a number of women crime/mystery writers who are highly regarded in the Japanese literary scene. Kirino is one of the most prolific writers among them. Her gripping stories often highlight the subaltern position women take in crime stories, and at the same time present alternative models that subvert established power relations.

2. Three women and their homes

In the novel, entitled *Out*,⁹ Kirino explores the potential power of a woman protagonist who comes face to face with fear and abjection. It is a story of a woman who is expelled from the normality of womanhood, a concept that she interrogates and problematises in all her works.

In *Out*, we are made to confront the scene of a woman cutting up a dead body. The body in this case is that of a man, and our gaze focuses on how to dispose it. This body does not hold a truth to be uncovered; we know from the beginning why and how it is there, dead in his wife’s friend’s bathroom. It is a situation more of his own making than his wife, Yayoi’s, who strangled him. Yayoi, who worked nightshift at a *bentō* [boxed-lunch] factory to supplement his income, could not suffer any longer the emotional, physical and financial torment he inflicted on her.¹⁰ He was obsessed with Anna, a beautiful young nightclub hostess from Shanghai, China, who, however, would never reciprocate his devotion. Having used up the family savings, he was at the end of his tether, without a prospect of seeing Anna at all. He directed his frustration towards his wife. One night Yayoi felt something snapped in her. “With lightning speed she slipped off her belt and wrapped it around his neck.”¹¹ Her own action surprised her, but she felt no regret. Yayoi called Masako, a co-worker at the *bentō* factory, who then decided to help dispose of the body, to save Yayoi and her young sons.

Masako is our hardboiled protagonist, an infallible hero like Sam Ryan, except that she is a suburban housewife with no professional credentials. Masako's solitude (a necessary qualification to be a hardboiled protagonist) is caused, firstly by the alienation she felt at her former work place, a bank where a career path is open only to people (men) with a university degree. Secondly and more importantly, her spirits are being crushed by a slow internal corrosion, as it were, taking place at her own family home. Masako once felt sad, angry and helpless, but is now feeling numb.

Masako knew that there was more than a little resemblance between her husband, who hated the business world and spend his free time shut away in this little room like some mountain hermit, and her son who had given up communicating with the world altogether. For her part she had decided that there was very little she could do or say to either of them. They were quite a trio.¹²

Kirino uses the metaphor of a cocoon; Masako's husband began to build one to "inhabit his own solitary realities." He does so under the same roof in the house that the couple built for their shared future. She cannot penetrate this cocoon, as he pushes away both her and their son.

Her husband's hands, which no longer reached out to touch her, were busy at work now constructing a shell. Both she and their son were somehow tainted by the outside world and so they had to be rejected along with everything else, no matter how much it hurt them.¹³

Masako instead finds solace in nightshift work at a *bentō* factory, where the physically taxing work temporarily fills the void, and women co-workers give her a sense of connectedness. So here she is, a suburban housewife, putting on gloves and an apron similar to the one pathologists wear, and confronts the task of dismantling the body of her friend's husband laid out in the family bathroom. She does it in an assumed professionalism, and in the name of justice and pragmatism. Nonetheless, the scene is

chilling and hard to stomach, as it takes place in the supposedly clean-and-proper everyday space, not dissimilar to average family homes.

Occasionally overwhelmed by disgust and panic, and with a help of another woman, Masako manages to complete the task of cutting the body into smaller pieces, so that it can be disposed of as household rubbish. During this task – it can only be called a task, since it is not murder – women persevere just as they do when they clean a bathroom, do laundry, or change diapers for toddlers or elderly under their care. That is not to say that they have no psychological difficulty doing this unusual task; they feel constantly threatened by the sense of being sacrilegious, defiling, unethical, improper, illegal and unclean. It is therefore necessary for the women to reason themselves that the dead body has transformed into an inanimate, disposable object that used to belong to a home, but no longer so.¹⁴

It is significant that these women do not cross the boundaries of taboo in order to fulfill their desire, but rather, crossing this boundary triggers their access to an awareness of what they really want. In other words, they had not explored their own psychological landscape to locate a piece of desire that could be called their own until this experience. They have now found in themselves an acute desire to change, to get out of the home they worked hard to create and sustain up to that moment. Their home no longer provides comfort, freedom of self-expression or safe communication. Even though both men and women (and also children) can be disappointed by their own unfulfilled lives, women – mothers in particular – feel more trapped by the duty-of-care roles imposed on them. Yayoi, who killed her husband, has two young children to support. Yoshie, who helps Masako for money with the bathroom tasks, has unruly teenage daughters, a baby grandson and an incapacitated mother-in-law to look after all on her own:

None of them could get along without her – when you thought about it, that was her reason for living. ... The role kept her going, helped her survive the dreary work; it was her one source of pride. ... Yoshie had wrapped up everything personal that mattered in a tight package and stored it away somewhere far out

of sight, and in its place she had developed a single obsession: diligence. This was a trick for getting by.¹⁵

As for Masako, the night shift work gives her reason to get out of the house when both her husband and her son are in the home. Mentally cocooned and having shut down communication with her and with each other, the two men yet faithfully come home to her dinner table every night; she is expected to feed them there come rain or shine.

3. Kitchen, bathroom and bodily margins

Along with the multifunction toilet seat, boxed lunches (*bentō*) are often mentioned as emblematic of Japanese culture by foreign visitors. The fact that these two are connected in this novel must be noted: kitchen and bathroom, eating and excreting, or what comes into our body and what is expelled from it. Women are assigned to look after both ends, which goes along with being tied to corporeality, which also co-opts a category of women who are universally self-sacrificial and unconditionally giving. The image of the Mother in most cultural discourses remains untouchable, taking no question about its credibility. Almost all Kirino's works interrogate the existence of this phantom Woman and stresses that She should not be confused with real women.¹⁶

Food is something that, in Kristeva's terms, crosses the boundaries – getting inside the body, becoming the body, and exiting the outside of the body. The bodily margins are an ambivalent field we carry around to sustain our existence, and women are positioned to monitor them closely. In most cultures, feeding is a women's duty of care, just as it is women that give life to other human beings. Feeding is also associated with a maternal expression of love. Why, then, might not Japanese housewives make themselves proud by creating elaborate *o-bentō*, and indulge in the illusory power of being acknowledged for this by others, such as friends of their children and colleagues of their husbands?¹⁷ Most women, however, know deep at heart that the respect they receive is temporary, or even illusory, and if they did not know, they quickly find out. They are bound to realize that their proud boxed-lunch is simply more unpaid overtime, through which they can never be promoted to a better position.

We should then ask what better position we are talking about, in the home and in the society at large. Kirino grapples squarely with this very basic question in this novel, and the answer she gives comes out in a scream, “*Out*”. The term “out” can connote, according to the OED, similar but different scenarios – away from home; displaced; missing; exhausted; lost; defeated; into public circulation. It can mean both to be defeated in a family game, as in “You are out”, but also to physically walk away from it with one’s own volition, as in “I am out.” In either way the real woman is going to be absent from the ideology of Family and Home, because she is “exhausted” and “displaced.” Kirino also implies at the end of the novel that to be out is a solution.

The story begins with the desolate car park of a *bentō* factory in the outer suburbs of northwest Tokyo, an area where the gentrification of the western suburbs, often called the New Town projects, never quite reached even in the height of the 1980s’ bubble economy.¹⁸ Part-time workers on the nightshift are hardworking housewives and young Brazilian migrant workers of Japanese descent. Their work begins just before midnight and ends at 5:30 am. The description of the way the workers go through the hygiene clearance regime is so fastidious that it is reminiscent of Orwellian surveillance and control. Finishing twelve hundred curry lunches, the women on the line “quickly move to another station for their next assignment: two thousand special ‘Lunch of Champions’ boxes’.”¹⁹ Yoshie, the skipper, controls the start and speed of the conveyor belt, jostling the workers on the line to keep up with that speed in making these identical quality lunch boxes one by one. There is no room for human emotion, such as mother’s love, in this process.

The New York Times reviewer of this novel describes this novel to be “a scathing allegory about the subjugation of women in Japanese society.” The Village Voice reviewer sees the characters to be living “on society’s bottom.”²⁰ And yet, looking closer, readers soon realize that the novel is nowhere confining the protagonists and the events to a certain group – economic or indeed cultural. Focusing on cultural specifics

when reading a foreign novel, we run the risk of missing its central theme, a more universal message that it aims to convey.

To recapitulate, so far three women have been introduced in connection with this crime: Yayoi, who strangles her husband to death, as rage overtakes her in a moment of despair; Masako, who impulsively takes on the disposal of the body to save Yayoi and her children; and Yoshie, a hardworking widow who singlehandedly supports two daughters, a grandson and a bed-ridden mother-in-law. Yoshie is an expert in managing both food and bodily fluids. Her small, overcrowded house is described to have a constant smell of urine and excrement mixed with disinfectants. She lives in the abject space, though still thriving in the role of Mother and not allowing herself to know what she really wants at least at the beginning of the story.

Yoshie, regarded as the best worker at the factory, cherishes the camaraderie she shares with Masako and others in her group. It must be noted, however, that as feminist as it is, this novel is not about women's solidarity, and that Kirino carefully depicts irreconcilable differences among women and underscores the unstable nature of their solidarity. Kuniko, the fourth woman involved in the crime, a young co-worker at the factory, is described as helplessly frivolous and untrustworthy. Her case is tragic, because she is someone who cannot help herself.

She knew how things worked. A woman who wasn't attractive could not expect to get a high-paying job. Why else would she be working the night shift in a factory like this? But the stress of the job made her eat more. And the more she ate, the fatter she got.²¹

She wishes that she were a "different woman, living a different life, in a different place, with a different man." It is her daydream, and this does not mean that she knows what she wants. She dreams of a high life, an imaginary life of an imaginary woman, projected by the popular media, women's magazines in her case. She is, in this sense, severely infected by the disease, most common among women. In creating the character

of Kuniko, flippant and undesirable, Kirino is relentlessly antagonistic. In the end Kuniko dies, and her body is carried into the same bathroom to be dismembered by other women.

A romantic rendition of human relations, including women's solidarity, is thus something Kirino consistently rejects. While a hardboiled hero would not be expected to dirty his hands with the blood and flesh of a dead body, Kirino's realism goes beyond the established comfort zone of that genre.²² Woman and abjection go hand in hand in this novel, which does risk pushing the woman back into the semiotic, just as Kristeva was accused of for her theory of abjection. To define abjection as the pre-symbolic, or as something bodily to discard in order to constitute the clean-and-proper speaking subject, and hence to relate it as the archaic mother, risks a pre-empting of feminist efforts to affirm the existence of a maternal subject. In case of Kirino, this risk-taking is strategic. By demonstrating a number of binary constructs –woman/man, body/mind, emotional/rational and object/subject – in a provocative way, she aims to incite in a reader active participation in deconstruction.

In Masako's bathroom, ankle deep in blood, she discusses with Yoshie how they could most efficiently cut into small pieces the body of their friend's husband. This is the bathroom, Masako notes, that her husband insisted on making wide when they designed the house. She finds it *ironic* that it is wide enough to fit a man's body on the floor next to the tub. Even though her dreams of family and home have turned sour, she cannot articulate her anger and frustration, but instead finds irony in the situation. Irony can appear when a straightforward criticism is not possible. Just as in other hardboiled heroes, the inability to express her emotions underscores her sadness, and her emotions are illustrated instead by the series of actions she takes, which begins in this bathroom.

It was only a decade earlier than this novel's publication that Yoshimoto Banana's images of a grandmother's well-used kitchen and of a large white fridge owned by a transgendered mother symbolized close-net human relations and the home that provides them.²³ While the family Yoshimoto proposed was unconventional, it was nonetheless

built on a romantic rendition of human connections. Kirino's bathroom is also symbolic, but on a very different level. Apart from being intended to be a restful and rejuvenating space for the family, the bathroom is a place where one washes off the outside world to become, say, free of infection; in this context cleanness has a particular connotation. Masako desecrates this place by cutting up a dead body in it; there is a subtext in this act of a defilement ritual for the sacred Home. Like any ritual, the bathroom scene is uncanny; it captures the moment of transition from the homely to the non-homely, or *Heimlich* to *Unheimlich* exactly in the literal sense.²⁴ Hence discarding the body in faraway woods, for example, was not an option for this story.

4. Sexual deviancy and human decency

Equally uncanny is the *bentō* factory. Women with problems at home and Brazilian migrants together produce *haha no aji* [the taste of home cooking] through the night, wearing a uniform that covers them head to toe, bearing not a speck of dust. In this factory, anyone with a visible skin aberration is barred from entering the production line, since their body is considered a potential agent of infection. Masako hesitates for a moment to enter this uninviting work place every time. She contemplates, "I would rather go home, but where is home?" Miyamori, a young Brazilian, is feeling rejected by his mother's home country, Japan, and also wonders whether he should go home to Brazil. His ability to sense Masako's subtle change of emotion, displayed in heartfelt efforts to communicate with her, is a stark contrast to the relations she has with her family. Miyamori is the dark horse, so to speak, representing a possibility of romance scarce in this novel. Appearing first as a sexual pervert who jumps on women in the dark, in a surprising turn of events Miyamori comes to embody human decency and future possibility.

If human decency can be explained as the tendency in a person to respect other human beings and their desires, Satake, another hardboiled protagonist of this novel, has none of that. He has been obsessed by one past incident, in which he tortured and raped a strong-willed woman. His tragedy lies in the fact that he gained the utmost pleasure at the very moment of the woman dying, with him inside her. Satake cannot be aroused by

other women, including the beautiful Chinese nightclub hostess, Anna, whom he regards as no more than a favourite pet. Anna is a girl from Shanghai who came to Japan to make money; she has a plan to start a business when she goes home. When the secret past of Satake is revealed to her, Anna makes a decisive exit, reflecting on a memory from her childhood when she had a family trip to Manchuria and visited the war memorial; "Japanese men could do awful things like that," she remembers. It is significant that Anna is given a voice here, when juxtaposed with silent Guo Dong Lee, the girl from Manchuria who was inflicted with violence at a love hotel in Tokyo in Haruki Murakami's 2004 novel, *After Dark*.²⁵

After Dark makes an interesting comparison since it features inner city Tokyo (much like Shinjuku or Shibuya) in the hours between just before midnight till the first morning train, exactly the duration when the women in *Out* work at the *bentō* factory in the northwest suburbs of Tokyo. Mari, the main protagonist in *After Dark*, is a girl from Hiyoshi, one of the clean, leafy, middle-class New Towns in the southwest suburbs. Murakami's novel indicates that a danger hovers over Mari's sister, Eri, who cannot wake from her sleep, being guarded by a faceless man in their supposedly safe home in the supposedly safe suburb. The novel tells us that the inner city, which becomes a secluded island space at midnight when all the trains stop for the day, offers a safe refuge to a young girl, while her home in a genteel suburb cannot. *After Dark* is also a critique of Home but, unlike *Out*, much less obviously so.

In *After Dark* a lot is implied, such as a justice meted out *off stage* to the assailant by the Chinese Mafia whose method of revenge is to "cut one's ear off."²⁶ Kirino, in contrast, deals with it *on stage*. Masako is taken hostage by Satake, and is tortured and raped. Only by going this far is Kirino able to give voice to the dead woman, the woman Satake has believed all along that he shared the most blissful orgasm with, just before she drew the last breath. Masako understands Satake's unusual eroticism in the midst of violent intercourse, but soberly rejects his fantasy and disrupts his planned *jouissance*. She cuts him deeply into the face with a scalpel hidden in her pocket. But there is no

romantic narrative of justice prevailing here either. Masako instead holds Satake, weeping, at his dying moment. She even mourns over his death in the days following.

The image of Satake's sexual height has a lingering effect on the reader. As disturbing as it is, the initial moment of *jouissance* he describes is acutely seductive. Eroticism itself goes beyond ethical judgment, and novels along with other forms of art provide a space for us to explore it.²⁷

5. Back to women's solidarity

Eroticism in terms of woman's own desire is a theme on its own. It strikes me as a wise decision, therefore, that director Hideyuki Hirayama and scriptwriter Wishing Chong excluded the sexual encounter between Masako and Satake, and indeed toned down eroticism altogether in their 2002 film version of *Out*.²⁸ Though regrettable in one sense, the story is clearer, as Satake is not obsessed with his dead woman, nor is Masako forced to face her own sexual desire.

The film depicts Masako as meticulous and conscientious, perhaps excessively so, in her housework. This makes her look more forbearing than hardboiled. The subtle difference here is crucial, since the forbearing personality places her in a network of women, rather than presenting her as a lone fighting girl. The film makes it clear that Masako is alienated in her own house, in which she dutifully cooks and cleans for her uncommunicative husband and son. The film viewers are thus drawn empathetically into her world early in the film, while the novel leaves the reader to slowly find out about her over the course of events, as a good mystery would. Nevertheless, the film has its own ingenious device that prepares the audience for the cathartic ending. In one repeated scene Masako calls out to her son through his closed door, giving him the necessary daily messages, despite the fact that she knows very well she will get no reply. This scene appeals to viewers as more excruciating and challenging than even the gruesome bathroom scenes, which are peppered by comical interjections from the women to ease their anxiety.

On the one hand, the film spells out for the audience reasons for the women's diabolical actions, and in that it does justice to the novel's major premise, "when her home is no longer a home." On the other, however, the film sets out to arrive at a different point. While I earlier stressed that Kirino did not highlight women's solidarity in her text, the film shifted entirely to this theme with all four women are supporting each other to the end. In the final scenes the women are on the run and heading for Alaska – a romantic dream of going to see the northern lights is played out there. They are trying to hitchhike on a snowy road in Hokkaido, the northern most prefecture of Japan, and in a moment of despair, are picked up by a woman truck driver, who embraces them. The driver's earthy northern accent is both reassuring and forgiving. In addition to the communal emphasis, the film depicts a homosexual desire, though in passing, between Masako and Yoshie, when in comforting they hold each other awkwardly but with obvious love. There is no suggestion of this in the original text.

As all of the male characters disappear one after another, the film depicts a bleak reality, in which a home is no longer a home not just for women but for men, too. The difference however, is that women continue to seek verbal communication with other human beings, while men are forsaking that attempt. When her home is no longer a home, according to the film, a woman moves out of heterosexual institutions and finds other women. The protagonist in the novel also moves out, but she does so without a statement and without a companion. Kirino's Masako is discreet throughout reet, not verbalizing her intensions or emotions. She is hardboiled through to the end, which is, as readers will be relieved to find out, a happy one in the whole scheme of things.

Works cited

Azuma Hiroki and Akihiro Kitada, *Tokyo kara kangaeru: kakusa, kōgai, nashonarizumu* [Thinking in Tokyo: Class, Suburbs and Nationalism], Tokyo: NHK Shuppan Kyōkai, 2007.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge, 2002.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny", trans. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 17*, London: Vintage Books, 1999, pp. 217-56.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Hirayama Hideyuki (Dir.) *Out*, 20 Century Fox, 2004, DVD.

Horsley, Lee. *The Noir Thriller*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Kirino, Natsuo. *Out*, trans. Stephen Snyder, New York: Vintage International, 2005 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2002)

_____. *In*, Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2009.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Murakami Haruki. *After Dark*, trans. Jay Rubin, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2004)

Nin, Anais. *The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol.5*, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

Otomo, Rio. "Risk and Home: *After Dark* by Murakami Haruki", *Japanese Studies*, 2009, 29 (3), 358-366.

Saito Tamaki. *Beautiful Fighting Girl* [*sentō bishōjo no seishin bunseki*, 2000], trans. J. Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Sano Yoko. *Uso bakka: shinyaku sekai otogibanashi* [All Lies: A New Translation of World Fairy Tales], Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1985.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Tyler, Imogen. "Against Abjection," *Feminist Theory*, 2009, 10:77.

Yoshimoto Banana. *Kitchen*, New York: Grove Press, 2006 (Tokyo: Fukutake Shoten, 1988)

Morita Yoshimitsu. *Kicchin* [Kitchen], Shōchiku, 1989, DVD.

¹ *The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 5*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann, San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, p.171.

² *Uso bakka: shinyaku sekai otogibanashi* [All Lies: A New Translation of World Fairy Tales], 1998, p.206.

³ There is a popular Japanese TV series called *kasoken no onna* [The Woman from Forensic Science, 1999 onwards, Asahi TV], but it does not exclusively focus on autopsy.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982. While Kristeva was criticized for underscoring this imaginary association, it is true that women are related to abjection in most cultures and religions. See Imogen Tyler's elaboration on the criticism made against Kristeva in her article, "Against Abjection," *Feminist Theory*, 2009, 10:77. For more on the concept of abjection, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002)

⁵ For an extensive study of this genre, see Lee Horsley's *The Noir Thriller* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁶ This is exactly the position of women at large that Gayatri Spivak describes in "Can A Subaltern Speak?" (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois press, 1988, pp. 271-313).

⁷ The phantom woman I mention here is the “other woman” in Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), which I draw on again later in this essay.

⁸ For a further study on the Japanese “fighting girl” in the popular media, see Tamaki Saito’s analysis in *Beautiful Fighting Girl* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁹ The title is written in English in the original Japanese version (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1997). The English hard cover edition published in 2003 by Kodansha International sold 18,000 copies in the United States and was nominated for The Edgar Awards, Best Novel, in the same year. The page references in this article are from the English version with the same title (trans. Stephen Snyder, New York: Vintage International, 2005)

¹⁰ A *bentō* is a single-portion meal packed in a disposable container, covering a wide range of Japanese cuisine, which are reasonably priced and readily available in convenience stores, supermarkets and railway stations throughout Japan. The contents range from regional specialties to home cooking. The factory in the novel produces the latter, and hence would be mainly sold for consumption by workers and students.

¹¹ Kirino, *Out*, p. 48.

¹² Kirino, *Out*, p. 51.

¹³ Kirino, *Out*, p. 51.

¹⁴ Kirino, *Out*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Kirino, *Out*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Irigaray elaborates in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985) that the phallogocentric imagination has created a particular image of woman, which, like a ghost, hovers over living women. It is certainly, for women, a source of anxiety that urges them to switch on their relentless self-surveillance.

¹⁷ When the suffix “o” is attached to a noun, it acquires the meaning of being precious as well as the speaker being polite. Young mothers of children in kindergarten have been feeling increasingly obliged to demonstrate their competence by making appealing boxed-lunch for them.

¹⁸ For more information on the New Town projects and cultural divides in the Tokyo metropolitan districts, refer to *Tokyo kara kangaeru: kakusa, kōgai, nashonarizumu* [Thinking in Tokyo: Class, Suburbs and Nationalism] by Hiroki Azuma and Akihiro Kitada (Tokyo: NHK Shuppan Kyōkai, 2007)

¹⁹ Kirino, *Out*, p. 11.

²⁰ The Vintage International 2005 version carries extracts from various book reviews, most of which indicate that the story reads as pertaining to universal human condition, while some marginalize it as an issue peculiar to Japanese women.

²¹ Kirino, *Out*, p. 15.

²² According to Lee Horsley, being a cynical outsider is the definition of the hardboiled hero. The story should, in addition, mirror the social injustice of the time (*The Noir Thriller*, 2009).

²³ Banana Yoshimoto's novel, *kicchin* [Kitchen], was first published in Japanese by Fukutake Shoten in 1988. The film version of *kicchin* is further romanticized by the soft-focused, slow-moving world that director Yoshimitsu Morita created to highlight human kindness. He also moved the setting from Tokyo to Hakodate, Hokkaido, for this purpose.

²⁴ See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (Standard Edition, Vol. 17, pp. 217-56).

²⁵ The Japanese title is *afutā dāku* (Kōdansha, 2004). The violence takes place in room 404, which is the internet code for "a page not found." Even though the novel employs a style of magic realism, it is controversial, should this have an implication that the violence did not take place, considering its resonance to the wartime memory. I discuss related issues in my essay, "Risk and Home: *After Dark* by Murakami Haruki", *Japanese Studies*, 2009, 29 (3), 358-366.

²⁶ Murakami, *After Dark*, trans. Jay Rubin, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, p.74.

²⁷ Kirino further interrogates the power of eroticism in terms of woman's sexuality in her novel, *In* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 2009). No English version is available to this date.

²⁸ *Out* is available on DVD (20th Century Fox, 2004). The film received nominations for the Japan Academy Prize for Best Director, Best Main Actress (Mieko Harada) and Best Supporting Actress (Mitsuko Baisho). Prior to the film was a serialized TV drama (Fuji TV, 1999) and was also a theatre production directed by Yumi Suzuki (2000, 2002), which were both critically acclaimed adaptations.