DIVE-IN **2024**, **4**(**1**): 41–64
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/20094

DIVE-IN
An International Journal on Diversity & Inclusion

The Irradiated Body: Variations of the Feminine in the Post-Atomic Era

Veronica De Pieri
Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna

Abstract This study investigates the female body and its symbolic deconstruction that occurred following the double atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945) as well as the more recent nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant (2011). By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, this research explores the legacy of the *ryōsai kenbo* ('good wife, wise mother') model and how radioactivity exposure disrupted that ideal by transforming radioactivity-contaminated women into 'monsters'. Postfeminist theories on the 'monstrous-feminine' are implemented to read testimonies on radiophobia, starting from Hayashi Kyōko's production, the case study of the Hiroshima Maidens and Sono Sion's movie *Land of Hope* (2012). The aim is to prove how the radioactivity agency deconstructed the female body as a mere reproductive resource and encouraged an emergent vision of its reconstruction as a woman-individual, claiming her active participation as a social actor.

Keywords *hibakusha*; postfeminist theories; monstrous-feminine; testimonial narrative

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the female body and its symbolic deconstruction following the double bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945) and the more recent nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant (2011).

'Female' and 'femininity' in contemporary society have undergone a redefinition according to the postfeminist and gender studies that retrain the body through gender fluidity. The epistemological debate around the concept of 'womanhood' reflects, even at a linguistic level, how the definition of woman is subordinate to that of man (wo-man) and, therefore, not autonomous and independent.[1] In this regard, Judith Butler distinguishes the 'feminine' component from that umbrella of peculiar socio-cultural characteristics imposed and described in the neologism 'femaleness', in other words, everything associated with femininity ([1999] 2023: 133).

This study aims to contribute to the debate by considering a particular category of women, the *hibakusha*. This term refers to victims who survived the atomic bombings (被爆者) and those involuntarily exposed to the nuclear fall-out at Fukushima Daiichi (被曝者). These women were confined to the margins of society, and their socio-political agency was thus neglected. They were seen as 'deformed,' or 'monstrous' and this led to their exclusion from the public sphere. *Hibakusha* women's particular condition was exacerbated by the fact that their acceptance as social actors was limited to conforming to the Japanese patriarchal mentality of being a wife and mother,[2] two requirements that radioactivity inhibited by compromising their reproductive and generative potential, as "monsters beget monsters."

The investigation employs an interdisciplinary perspective that first aims at contextualizing Japanese ideologies and culture-specific traditions at a historical and social level concerning the concepts of womanhood and motherhood. To do so, it delves into the normative concept of *ryōsai kenbo*「良妻賢母」: the socio-political praxis that stigmatized the role of Japanese women in the period between the two world wars. The slogan *ryōsai kenbo* ('good wife, wise mother') refers to a broad theoretical framework, a set of good

[1] This is true for the English language, while the word 'woman/women' does not reflect equal hierarchical subordination in other socio-cultural aspects of languages.

[2] This study adopts the definition of "patriarchy" as interpreted by critic Jude Ellison Sady Doyle, i.e., a social construct that creates sexism and needs it, responsible for creating gender binarism: "A cultural and moral hegemony that imposes a single and 'natural' family structure - one in which man uses woman to procreate and raise 'his' children and where the father exercises unquestionable authority over mother and children." ([2019] 2021: 16).

behavioural practices that regulated and simultaneously limited the role of women to that of caregivers. In contemporary times, postfeminist theories agree that defining women exclusively based on their generative capacity is misleading in that many are unable or unwilling to procreate. They do not, however, lose their femininity because of this. Motherhood is thus a bio-cultural product of a patriarchal mindset, which is still very strong in Japan, and, as this study shows, it finds its way into the roots of the *ryōsai kenbo*.

Socio-anthropological sources have been implemented to explore the historical reverberation of the *ryōsai kenbo* motto in Japanese society on the eve of World War II. The testimonial narrative of the Nagasaki *hibakusha* Hayashi Kyōko provides evidence of how the atomic event, with the consequent physical corruption of the body, entailed the imposition of a non-normative, different, and often unfavourable acceptance of femininity in the public sphere. In this regard, the research takes advantage of psychopathological investigations to better understand the psychological trauma that arose from the atomic experience and the redefinition of a new female identity.

The ostracism shown towards *hibakusha* women finds explanations in their association not only with otherness, in the sense of non-normative, but also with the monstrous, due to the corruption of the female body caused by exposure to atomic radioactivity. The case study of the Hiroshima Maidens sheds light on the pernicious dilemma of the young *hibakusha* who resorted to plastic surgery to conceal the physical effects of the atomic bombings and become re-accepted into their community. In this sense, the postfeminist investigations by Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, among others, constitute an essential source for defining what Creed termed 'monstrous-feminine' (1993).

The socio-cultural legacy of *ryōsai kenbo* and the prejudice of impure and monstrous characteristics attributed to the survivors of the double atomic bombings then found fertile ground for revival following the nuclear accident that occurred in March 2011 at the Fukushima Daiichi. The nuclear fall-out, which occurred as a result of the powerful impact of a tidal wave on the Fukushima nuclear power plant, occurred in the days following March 11, when Japan was shaken by one of the most violent earthquakes ever recorded, with its epicentre off the coast of Tōhoku in northern Japan. This nuclear accident was later equated in severity with the 1986 Chernobyl accident and resulted in the evacuation of an area 30 km in radius from the nuclear power plant. An analysis of the film *Land of Hope* (2012) by director Sono Sion highlights elements of continuity and rupture between the women who survived the atomic bombings and those who experienced the nuclear fallout at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in March 2011.The final aim of this study is to highlight how the complexity of the radiation exposure imposed a

re-evaluation of the role of women in Japanese society, no longer limited to their duty as *ryōsai kenbo* but defined in a new identity, one whose alterity is no longer regarded as monstrous, but comes to terms with the effects of radioactivity. A new feminine identity that does not reduce its social role to the mere sphere of reproduction and care, but that imposes the social agency of women as thinking individuals.

2. Questioning the *ryōsai kenbo* Praxis

The *ryōsai kenbo*, a pivotal concept of the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), was coined by the intellectual Nakamura Masanao (中村正直, 1832 - 1891) in 1875 (Sievers 1983: 22). The term denoted a precise construct of the female ideal aimed at exalting - and thus normalising - particular aesthetic characteristics and moral attitudes, preached in the *kakun* 家訓 (family dictates), *kyōkun* 教訓 (educational manuals) and *jokun* 女訓 (teachings for women). As Nomura-Ichimasa reported, some of these texts read as follows: "women must be kind, obedient, loyal, thoughtful and quiet" (2019: 91). The image to promote was the one of a woman as the core of the household, devoted to caring for the home, the elderly and children, especially since procreation was seen as a woman's patriotic duty and the *ie* 家 (family institution) represented the beating heart of the nation. Domestic work became the performance of femininity par excellence:

> Body politics expressed the realization that our [women's] most intimate and supposedly private experiences were, in fact, matters of high political significance and crucial to the nation-state (Federici 2023: 46-47).

Federici reflected on the domestication of the family institution, which was indoctrinated to recognise but simultaneously limit the so-called 'feminine virtues' to the *locus domesticum* referring to its double Latin meaning of a 'familial' and 'patriotic, national' space. In effect, in Japan the promotion of *ryōsai kenbo* was intended to recognize the role of women as an essential instrument of social growth, in a view that was very much inspired by the modern state in the Euro-American area, where women, through feminist movements, were claiming their emancipation. The idea of *ryōsai kenbo* thus functioned as a ploy to quell discontent and extreme revolts by recognizing women as central figures in public life: "Excellent mothers lead to excellent children, and these lead to an excellent country" (Koyama 2013: 33). As a social construct, motherhood included not only childbirth but also, and in particular,

the act of loving, raising, and educating their offspring. Hence, there was a belief that women had a tremendous moral influence over adult citizens, thus inspiring the attempt to give them an indispensable role in the state. However, the problem lay in the limitations imposed by that role: a woman's value was measured solely as a wife and mother; socio-political participation had to be constrained to the domestic sphere:

> Becoming a wife and mother, for a woman, and becoming a husband and father, for a man, is a career. This is a natural division of labor; its boundaries cannot be crossed. Becoming a wife and mother is a career limited to women (Shimoda [1904] 1973: 172-173).[3]

In this sense, the atomic bomb represented a revolution. The irradiated female body, which saw in the variation of the menstrual cycle proof of biological corruption, has been the object of ostracism and rejection in the Hiroshima aftermath: a physical and metaphysical distancing from the public space that finds its foundations in the deconstruction of the traditional concept of the female body. At the core of this deconstruction process was the association of the *hibakusha* women with the Shinto concept of *kegare* 汚れ, impurity (Raveri 2006: 155) responsible for their transformation into other, abject, monstrous figures.

The concept of M/Other conceived by Braidotti ([1996] 2021: 64), represents a valid interpretive keyword of the women who experienced the radioactivity contamination: on the one hand, the social expectation that these women performed the social role to which they were designated (wife and mother) according to the old imperative dictated by the *ryōsai kenbo.* On the other hand, the experience of the atomic bombings and the Fukushima Daiichi fallout which transformed them into something else, incomprehensible and therefore miserable, perhaps tainted and contaminating.

The following section explores the liminal position assumed by *hibakusha* women from a multidisciplinary perspective that considers, on the one hand, the Shinto beliefs on impurity and, on the other, postfeminist theories of the monstrous feminine. Hayashi Kyōko's testimony is presented as the voice of these survivors of atomic annihilation.

[3] According to Shimoda, this clear distinction was the result of modern "Western" conceptions based on the "psychology of sexual differences", which placed women in a subordinate position to men as physiologically weaker. See Koyama (2013: 45).

3. *Ijōsei* 異常性 versus *ijosei* 異女性: Alterity versus a not Normative Femininity

This section correlates postfeminist theories of female monstrosity to the peculiar condition of *hibakusha* women (atomic bombing survivors and Fukushima evacuees). This cross-cultural bridging between Japan and (mainly) Western societies-focused studies[4] is not forced, considering that the country's cultural background, particularly the plurality of Shinto beliefs and rituals, see the concept of *kegare* (impurity) as a pivotal aspect in the ostracism of women, especially during menstruation and childbirth, when a woman's connection to procreation is most evident. These aspects are also shared by various postfeminist theories regarding the association of the monstrous with the feminine, in which pregnancy and motherhood are simultaneously perceived as miraculous and superhuman. As Haraway has argued,

> Nature has long been the realm of the magical and the inanimate of which no certain knowledge was possible - it has been sexualised as a woman, for it is enigmatic, mutable at first, maternal and then vindictive and witchlike, a source of nourishment and at the same time of catastrophe ([1992] 2019: 16).

The metaphor between a woman's body and the fertility of the earth is embodied in the expression 'Mother Earth', which evokes a fertile, life-giving womb although it can also be a source for natural disasters.

In addition, Western Society has a variety of widespread images of impurity such as: blood, vomit, pus, feces, sweat, just to name a few. These are socially constructed notions of contamination (Creed 1993: 15) that reflect a loss of distinct corporal boundaries undermining a clear order. For these reasons, they can be linked to Freud's definition of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*; 1919) as their liminal position, between two physical spheres (inside/outside), challenges human comprehension. Historically, childbirth has always been considered a magical, mysterious, and miraculous act beyond human understanding; it is sacred and profane simultaneously - and, therefore, uncanny. The generative power of mothering is ultimately incomprehensible, thus fomenting its abjection:

[4] This study tries as much as possible to avoid the terms "West/Western" so as not to incur unwanted forms of Orientalism.

> Blood, indicating the impure, takes on the 'animal' seme of previous opposition and inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection, where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together (Kristeva 1982: 96).

Barbara Creed, in her thought-provoking *The monstrous-feminine* (1993), argues that feminine monstrosity is a creation of patriarchal ideology to maintain a particular social order, which is male-dominated. This misogynistic view denigrates the reproductive female body by associating it with impurity, and in doing so, it connects women to a threat which may undermine the symbolic order. The scholar refers to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and maternal to prove that monstrous-feminine is always related to mothering and reproductive functions. This happens because cycle and birth are "quintessentially grotesque" (Margaret Miles, quoted by Creed 1993: 43). According to Kristeva, the term 'abjection' alludes to being outcasted and ostracized and everything that does not respect boundaries, thus challenging identities and pre-constituted systems.

These considerations are exacerbated by the radioactivity contamination. The atom is "the perfect 'machine' of disintegration" (Morante [1987] 2013: 109), capable of separating the individual in its physical corruption on the one hand and the integrity of the conscience on the other. For the victims, the radioactivity contamination represented a social stigma that led to their discrimination during the first decades after World War II as well as soon after the Fukushima Daichi nuclear power accident.

Crispino, in her passionate preface of the Italian translation of Rosi Braidotti's *Mothers, Monsters, and Machines* ([1996] 2021), shared some considerations regarding the abject, the normative and feminine status:

> In fact, 'deformed' bodies are a constant not only in scientific discourse, particularly biological, psychological and medical discourse but also in many social disciplines that focus on 'normality' as a basic model. The abnormal, or the abnormal, is thus constituted as an abject and yet ubiquitous figure: the 'Other' must be avoided at all costs, the one to whom it is forbidden to resemble. Everything is played out precisely on similarity and difference, where the distinguishing marks and, thus, the criteria for differentiation are not sexual attributes but organs, morphologies or specific physiognomies. Normality, defined as 'degree zero of monstrosity', sums up a series of

> expectations and socio-symbolic norms that make a specific type of corporeity the standard model (Crispino [1996] 2021: 15-16).

Crispino defined 'otherness' as a deviance manifested through "organs, morphologies or physiognomies." These categories include the *hibakusha* of the atomic bombings, whose keloids constituted the principal cause of social stigma and symbolized the corruption of the biological norm.

Figure 1: S. Ushio, Photo courtesy Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. More information regarding her experience can be found at https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/mrs-herskovitzs-kimono"https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/mrs-herskovitzs-kimono (last access on 02/05/2024).

Indeed, in the specific case of the *hibakusha* woman, the experience of the atomic bombs was embodied in the female body to the point of corrupting her fertility, necessitating a reconfiguration of her role in the socio-political sphere. Their exclusion from community life was not only due to their mortified body (see Figure 1); those visible wounds on the skin also meant a disfigurement on the social body: the shame of losing the war and seeing Japanese sacred ground occupied by foreigners. Moreover, keloids also represented a *memento mori*: the awareness that the experience of the atomic bombs did not end on 6th or 9th August, but that radioactivity could one day manifest itself and corrupt future generations. Generally speaking, impurity comes from the idea of contagion, which is even stronger in the case of *hibakusha*. As narrated by Ibuse Masuji

(井伏鱒二, 1858-1993) with the words of Yasuko, the protagonist of *Kuroi ame* 『黒い雨』(*The Black Rain,* 1965-1966) and later also used in Imamura Shohei's 1989 film, this made it difficult for many women to marry.

In her rich documentary and fictional production on the subject, the *kataribe* 語り部 (spokesperson) of Nagasaki, Hayashi Kyōko (林京子, 1930-2017), recounted the profound discomfort of the *hibakusha* women, highlighting the centrality of the irradiated female body as the key to interpreting the 6th and 9th of August. The author, who witnessed the atomic annihilation of Nagasaki on August 9th, 1945, was only fourteen years old when the atomic blast killed almost all her friends and classmates at the Mitsubishi Munitions Factory, where she was mobilised as a student from the Nagasaki Girls' High School. Her testimonial of her atomic bomb experience, *Matsuri no ba* 『祭りのば』(*Ritual of Death*), won the Akutagawa Prize in 1975. In a fragment of *Akikan* 『空罐』(*The Jar*, 1978), Hayashi reunites with some old school friends who survived the Nagasaki bombing and reflects on a school writing competition from the past:

> Nishida's theme was 'Women's Suffrage', and Oki's was 'Women and Careers.' In her speech, Oki fervently asserted that women should emancipate themselves from the role of procreation, and it seemed to be precisely this that was mortifying her now. "It was a premonition. I never found out what procreation means," Oki said in a joking tone (Hayashi [1978] 2015b: 73).

Fecundity endangered by the atomic bombing forced a cultural revaluation of the female body: the womb, formerly considered a source of life and therefore an indispensable resource for the entire community, was correlated with death, that is, with the danger of transmitting genetic malformations to future generations due to the atomic experience. This cultural bias has resurfaced in the post-Fukushima scenario. This oxymoron is a stark contradiction to the biological cycle; it feels like an affront to the laws of nature. Although repeated clinical studies in the 1970s disproved any direct correlation between exposure to radioactivity and physio pathological malformations, the fear of secondary effects of *genbakushō* 原爆症, the so-called 'atomic bomb sickness', remained in the form of cancerous manifestations, cardiovascular diseases and psychosomatic disorders, to name but a few.[5] Furthermore, such concerns also

[5] For a detailed compendium of the genbakushō symptomatology, both on a physiological and psychological level, from the earliest data collected by the Research Center for Radiation Disaster Medical Science at Hiroshima University and by the Atomic Bomb Casualty

dominated public opinion in the evacuated cities within the Fukushima Daiichi zone in 2011. The acute radiation syndrome (ARS), which shares analogous, yet different, characteristics with *genbakushō*, has seen the Japanese population turn into "Pierre and Marie Curie people" (Giordano 2012: 36) soon after the nuclear catastrophe. Geiger counter in hand, the Japanese citizenry of the northeastern part of the country improvised as nuclear scientists, alert to both *gai hibaku* 外被爆 (direct or weather-mediated radiation exposure) and the so-called *naibu hibaku* 内部被曝 (internal contamination) through ingestion of contaminated products or polluted air (Urashima 2011: 55). In particular, *genbakushō* and ARS share the exact uncertain nature: uncertainty in symptom manifestation and uncertainty in diagnosis and prognosis. This characteristic gives *hibakusha* the connotation of monstrous, as the very pathology they may be suffering from develops under medical and scientific uncertainty; it is hybrid, multifaceted and unpredictable in symptoms, and lacks certainty in treatment (Vyner 1988).

What if these women with an unstable monstrous nature generated life? The identity of their offspring would be impaired.

As previously seen, the allocation of women in society - their (valuable) role in the public sphere and thus their self-definition - is precisely determined, especially in Japan, by the reproduction of women's mothering (Chodorow [1978] 1999: 208). Femininity then, is configured according to the role of the mother in terms of how it is reflected outside the family and is, thus, socially defined and interpreted. According to Chodorow, this mechanism also works in reverse: women's emancipation becomes the achievement of a utopian goal since the male role, skills and self-determination are generated by a mirror reflection of women's lack of agency: "Women's mothering, then, produces psychological self-definition and capacities appropriate to mothering in women, and curtails and inhibits these capacities and this self-definition in men" (Chodorow [1978] 1999: 208).

In Japan, the post-atomic feminist struggle has not resolved in rebellious movements to "disarticulate or break out of the phallogocentric symbol," as stated by Braidotti ([1996] 2021: 24). On the contrary, *hibakusha* women conformed to the norm, unable to disentangle the two complementary faces of being an individual and a mother. Hayashi again denounces this aspect in a further testimony: "Unfortunately, we *hibakusha* are not put in a position to distance ourselves from abnormality (*ijō* 異常)" (Mitsuharu 2023: 29). Perhaps

Commission in the 1950s to the most recent neurological perspectives, see De Pieri (2023a; 2023b).

for this reason, in the aforementioned short story of *The Jar*, the author reports the experience of six women who grew up adopting the model of *ryōsai kenbo,* however, in final analysis, none managed to adhere to it: only one is married without children; the others are widows, single or divorced, as in the case of Hayashi herself. The terms *ijōsei* 異常性 versus *ijosei* 異女性 exemplify this ambivalence. That is, in the case of *hibakusha* women, their alterity versus another form of femininity deviates from the norm, and in other ways, they attempt, in vain, to fit into those same normative schemes, yet they are unable to entirely diverge from them.

Indeed, the body of the a-bomb *hibakusha* woman became a locus of regular scientific investigation, the repeated expectation of a physical manifestation of the corruption that the atomic bomb represented. As Hayashi confesses in her *Ritual of Death*:

> If I had had a blood test, I would probably have discovered that my white blood cells had dropped to two or three thousand. A few years ago, at one of the periodic check-ups reserved for A-bomb victims, I discovered that my white blood cells had dropped to 3600. I received a letter asking me to undergo more thorough examinations. I felt the fear of death more intensely than when I experienced it up close at the age of 14. I had a young son at that time and did not want to die (Hayashi [1975] 2015a: 163).

Therefore, the everyday life of an a-bomb *hibakusha* was dominated by the constant fear that this was the last day. "Every day is 9th August," as the author repeated on several occasions (Hayashi 1989: 215). In a broader generational view, the destruction did not end with Hiroshima and Nagasaki but rather began, renewing itself monthly in the female menstrual cycle (De Pieri 2014). Again, the oxymoron that sees the female cycle contaminated by radioactivity as an advocate not of life, but of death, returns. In this context, the *hibakusha* women's aspiration to motherhood seems contradictory. In fact, it is a desire that meets two needs: parenthood and acceptance in the community to which they belong.

The concept of motherhood is multifaceted: whether its definition embraces biological-determinist, socio-cultural or psychological theories, its centrality in the postfeminist debate confirms its non-resolution. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why the group of Hiroshima Maidens, children of an era when the patriarchal mentality would have women's values coincide with that of wife and mother, decided to resort to plastic surgery. To all appearances, the purpose was the recovery of a femininity free from the stigma

of the atomic bomb; but in actual fact, it was once again subjugating the female vocation to predetermined labels and pre-established gender roles.

4. Hiroshima Maidens: A Case Study

This section presents the case of the Hiroshima Maidens taking into consideration the monstrosity of the female body with reference to the inside/outside dynamic expressed previously; first, through the use of plastic surgery and, second, by the residual radioactive contamination within the survivor.

The *hibakusha* body became a vector of social inequality. The a-bomb *hibakusha* were detestable to look at, not only because their wounds were repulsive but because they represented the *memento* of a major collective dishonour. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of the body responded to more than just the desire to accomplish the aesthetic standards promoted by society (Ghigi & Sassatelli 2018: 108), rather, it became a re-appropriation of the possibility of articulating a political power, representing a visible social actor, and therefore claiming an individual role in the community. In this sense, the Hiroshima Maidens are prime representatives of the hibakusha.

In 1951, the young Niimoto Shigeko was the first *hibakusha* woman to undergo several surgeries in an attempt to alleviate the keloids that disfigured her face.[6] As a result of her experience, Reverend Tanimoto Kiyoshi promoted the institution of support groups to share the psychological discomfort of these young *hibakusha*. Reverend Tanimoto was well-known in the US for his *hibakusha* experience as it had been featured in John Hersey's first journalistic *Hiroshima* report (1946). Due to the severe keloid wounds, these young *hibakusha* were segregated at home by their families, held up to public derision in the streets, and rejected in jobs and marriage negotiations. Following this, Tanimoto set up a charitable foundation for the victims of the bombing: the Hiroshima Peace Centre Foundation, which, thanks to fundraising, enabled the first plastic surgery treatments for *hibakusha* impaired by keloids. Those wounds were commonly addressed as '*akuma no tsume ato*' 「悪魔の爪痕」 in Japanese media to stress the link between body disfiguration and the monstrous nature of atomic bombing survivors (see Figure 2; Jacobs 2010).[7]

[6] Details on Niimoto Shigeko' story can be found in Jacobs (2010).

[7] According to Jacobs, these "devil's claws" were a traditional expression for marks left by a natural disaster. In any case, there is no other evidence for this affirmation.

Shigeko Niimoto, left, in 1954 (from *SR*, April 9, 1954) and Shigeko Niimoto, right, in 1956, at a picnic in the U.S. shortly before her return.

Figure 2: Niimoto Shigeko, before and after plastic surgery. Photo courtesy of *The Saturday Review* 39(47), 1956, p. 29.

In 1952, Reverend Tanimoto attributed the name "The Society of Keloid Girls" to the group, who then became a media phenomenon, and the press subsequently began refering to them as *genbaku otome* 「原爆乙女」 (the 'atomic bomb virgins'). These young women underwent several unsuccessful reconstructive implant surgeries performed in Tōkyō and Ōsaka.

Thanks to Norman Cousins, who worked for the *Saturday Review*, Reverend Tanimoto's group was accepted at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, where, in May 1955, a medical equipe gave a new face and, thus, a new life to a group of twenty-five *hibakusha* women, including a large number of teenagers.[8]

Nevertheless, for the Hiroshima Maidens, this charity project represented the homologation to a social normativity reflected in their outer appearance. Yet, the need for social recognition concealed a much more complex psychological trauma, not limited to coercion from the community that forced women to adhere to female models generated by a precise patriarchal mentality.

The experience of the atomic bomb was, therefore, not erased by plastic surgery, but only camouflaged. These young *hibakusha* girls tried to obliterate the marks of the atomic experience from their bodies without really succeeding because those wounds represented a more profound psychological trauma. They were, however, once again accepted into Japanese society and some of

[8] The full report of Hiroshima Maidens' story, written by Cousins, can be found here: https://hibakushastories.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Hiroshima-Maidens.pdf, (last access on 30/04/2024).

them resumed their role as wives and mothers but could not emancipate as individuals.

Indeed, while body surgery allowed for an almost full reintegration into Japanese society, the Hiroshima Maidens remained a symbol of the atomic bomb, the emblematic example of the world's rebirth from the ashes of World War II. They had experienced stigma in Japan, but abroad they were displayed and exhibited as public attractions (Graham 2014: 126). In the country's collective memory, the Hiroshima Maidens will always be associated with the horrors of war because they were thus immortalized by the global media: "the Hiroshima Maidens mutilated faces were manipulated signifiers, constantly and visibly contested through pictures and discourse, as well as across national borders and languages" (Graham 2014: 121).

Even when young Nakabayashi Tomoko died on the operating table, media attention was shifted to the slogan "Beauty Hunt Fatal" (Jacobs 2010), thus playing on the vain desire to undergo plastic surgery and not on the tragic misfortune that would never have happened had the young woman not wanted to fight her war traumas. The US mainstream press, in particular, was so fascinated by their stories that it advocated for a triumphant narrative of medical improvement and human compassion. A triumph that became a broadcasted show in an episode of the well-known program *This Is Your Life* devoted entirely to their story (Jacobs 2010). Graham observed:

> [the Hiroshima Maidens] represented a shadowy unknown Japanese 'Other', ethnically and psychoanalytically distinct from the Western audience who watched the show. Literally and figuratively profiled, the women sitting behind the screen conveyed a layered alterity; differentiated from the white American body because of their ethnicity, physical disfigurement, and lack of specific subjectivity (2014: 128).

The lack of a clear identity reveals a desire for recognition, achieved through plastic surgery. This process of constructing an identity is influenced by surgical and cultural factors as the natural, biological identity is altered and modified making it nonstandard.

Notwithstanding, the United States, both the perpetrator and the therapist of those wounds, could now ease the remorse from their guilty conscience. The US were, thus, identified as a generous benefactor, and Japan as a very grateful recipient (Wake 2022: 206). If this public rhetoric was effective internationally, Japan certainly did not address the problem head-on within its domestic

borders, allowing the legacy of the atomic bomb to become a major unsolved issue until the Fukushima Daiichi accident. Hayashi argued:

> Wounds and pain heal, yet they fill you up. For me, the visceral issue is much more crucial. It emerges in the form of disturbance. It can be psychological; in the case of the atomic bomb, the internal body is soaked in radioactive substances. It is a genetic issue; IT DID NOT END WITH THE BOMBING OF AUGUST SIX AND NINE. It is this pain that I want to write about (Hayashi 2011: 28).

Hayashi uses the term *uchi* 内, which is translated as both 'visceral' and 'internal' and refers to something 'inner, intimate and unconfessed.' The author captures the dual aspects of this concept: the invisible side, represented by the psychological trauma linked to radioactivity, and the visible side, scientifically documented and manifested through symptoms related to radioactive contamination.

Focusing exclusively on removing the mark of the atomic bomb on their skin, the Hiroshima Maidens ignored the *naibu hibaku*, the 'internal radioactivity contamination,' that Hayashi addressed as the 'internal enemy'. Hayashi, recounting the experience of a friend, revealed: "She had survived fearing to see an anomaly in that cyclical blood, so typically female" (Hayashi 1988: 183).

The term *uchi* employed by Hayashi is the same as the *naibu* compound in *naibu hibaku*. The inside/outside dichotomy in which radioactive contamination is played out is thus not only a metaphor for the psychological (inner) and physiological (outer) wound but becomes a site of uncertainty par excellence: that liminal gap between norm and deviance, attractiveness and monstrosity, acceptance and rejection. Butler clarifies in this statement: "The boundary of the body and the distinction between inside and outside is established through the expulsion and transvaluation of something that was initially part of the identity into a contaminating otherness" ([1999] 2023: 189). Some further considerations are worth highlighting: first, the blurred bodily boundaries, as thin as the line dividing health from the onset of radiation symptoms; second, the "expulsion" as rejection, non-recognition, devaluation which resolved in *hibakusha* social discrimination; and third, the "contaminating otherness" as a new definition that the survivors of the atomic bomb have seen attributed to their skin, especially the skin of the woman. Creed stressed the concept:

> The concept of inside/outside suggests two surfaces that fold in on each other; the task of separating inside from outside seems impossible as each surface constitutes 'the other' side of its opposite. The implication is that the abject can never be completely banished; if 'inside', the abject substance forms a lining for the outside; if 'outside', it forms a skin for the inside. The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination - blood, afterbirth, faeces (Creed 1993: 48).

Again, the blurred boundary between inside/outside, made even more unstable by radioactive contamination, insinuates the hypothesis of monstrosity, exacerbated by radioactivity exposure and manifested in the female body of the *hibakusha*.

Despite their apparent defeat, the group of Hiroshima Maidens benefited greatly in a healthy way from the use of plastic surgery: they shared common stories, strengthened sisterhood bonds, and reframed their traumatic memories by relying on mutual empathy. The Dutch psychiatrist van der Kolk has explained that when coping with psychological trauma as severe as was the atomic experience, social support has compensatory therapeutic effects due to the impact of 'reciprocity.' If society, as a whole, is unable to understand the atomic experience and, indeed, the community fears its implications, then sharing the psychological distress with other survivors helps to mitigate the effects of the traumatic experience:

> Many traumatised people find themselves constantly out of sync with those around them. Some find comfort [...] in those with similar backgrounds or experiences. Focusing on a shared history of trauma and victimisation alleviates their fierce sense of isolation, usually at the cost of having to deny individual differences (van der Kolk 2014: 92-93).

This happens because human emotional ties represent the greatest self-defence against threat (van der Kolk 2014: 251).

And herein lies the potential of the monstrous feminine: the Hiroshima Maidens managed to subvert the social order that wanted them mute, hidden, and forgotten. Through the power of unity and sharing, they bared their own body battered by keloids, offering it to the attention of the media. Those same wounds that had been the cause of their social rejection became the gateway to plastic surgery treatments. The process featured them in a pivotal historical transition: although they had not achieved social emancipation, these young *hibakusha* managed to perform an active female monstrosity: what was monstrous was no longer their atomic-bomb-scarred bodies but their having

escaped the social control that wanted to erase them (Doyle [2019] 2021: 19). In their way, they had won a great, albeit, small victory.

5. Post-Fukushima reflections

In her interview for *Repubblica*, Hayashi also emphasised that there was a red thread that linked the atomic bombings to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident (Lombardi & Hayashi 2005). Although the radioactive exposure from the nuclear fall-out was different, it brought renewed attention to the condition of the *hibakusha* and the issue of radiophobia. Director Sono Sion (園子温 , 1961 -) represented this social trauma in his 2012 film *Kibō no Kuni*『希望の国』(Land of Hope).

The movie focuses on the impact of radioactive contamination on the younger and older generations. In the film the breeding and farming couple choose not to evacuate the danger zone as moving seems to be too problematic for the delicate mental balance of the female protagonist, who suffers from a form of dementia, while the son is strongly urged to leave the paternal home in the company of his wife, especially considering the young couple's desire to have children. The film thus becomes a receptacle for one of the most common artistic *topos* following the nuclear fall-out: the depiction of radiophobia. One of these four protagonists is the woman who married the elderly couple's son. Her name is Ono Izumi, she is no longer very young, and she is also struggling with a longed-for pregnancy. Evacuated from the fictitious location of Nagashima (a crasis of Nagasaki and Hiroshima), an area very close to the damaged nuclear power plant, Ono must cope with the radiophobia that is turning her everyday life into a gruelling struggle. To do so, she must regain faith in her fertility and its regenerative power and hope that the invisible enemy, radioactivity, has not compromised her fertility.

In one scene at the movie's core, Ono, played by actress Kagurazaka Megumi, emerges from the gynaecology clinic. Outside, radioactivity awaits her, invisible but perceptible through an evanescent use of lights and sounds, dimmed and muffled by special effects. Ono Izumi can pragmatically feel the radioactivity surrounding her and the child she is carrying in her womb. Protective masks are not enough to persuade Ono of her safety: back in her apartment, she measures the amount of radiation present in the rooms using a Geiger counter; she seals doors and windows with cardboard and duct tape; and finally, she slips into a protective suit. When her husband returns home from work, thrilled by the happy announcement of the confirmed pregnancy,

he finds his wife at the living room table, wearing the protective clothes and surrounded by radioactivity-measuring tools. Ono Izumi's self-defensive reaction, aimed at protecting herself as much as the future generation she holds in her womb, is a maladaptive attitude that exaggerates radiation anxiety rather than exorcising it.

As discussed, womanhood is associated with the monstrous because the miracle growing in her is arcane, not yet defined, alive, but not fully human. The pregnant woman's body is subjected to constant changes, oscillations and stress. The woman perceives a loss of control over her physical condition, which is dominated by irrepressible appetites, compelling needs, mood alterations and visible physical changes. The reproductive power of women generates anxiety in a patriarchal society since pregnancy transforms the female body by defeating the myth of a fixed concept (Braidotti [1996] 2021: 87).[9]

Of course, nuclear fallout exacerbates this peculiar condition by insinuating the danger of radioactivity as a body-modifying agent, thus compromising not only a woman's femininity but also the life in her womb:

> Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman's life which have placed her on the side of the abject. It is woman's fertilisable body which aligns her with nature and threatens the integrity of the patriarchal symbolic order (Creed 1993: 49).

In the specific case of *hibakusha* women (a-bomb victims and people exposed to radiation), childbirth reflects the risk of hybrid newborns due to in-utero radiation exposure. Their fertility is uncanny because it questions human/non-human boundaries, opening the debate on the posthuman condition in the post-atomic era.

Yoshida Chia (吉田千亜, 1977 -), a freelance reporter from Fukushima, has continued covering mothers facing radioactivity contamination since the Fukushima Daiichi accident. In one of her book reports, *Sono ato no Fukushima. Genpatsu jikogo wo ikiru hitobito*『その後の福島。原発事故後を切る人々』(After Fukushima. People who live after the nuclear accident, 2018), the author collected interviews in the refugee shelters:

> Moreover, the information became complicated. Television repeated that there were no direct consequences for the country, but the radio appealed

[9] According to mainstream medicine, the female body, in itself, represents a variation from the norm; consider the diagnosis of heart attack, the parameters of which are based on male symptomatology, so that in 2018, as many as 53% of women did not have their symptoms recognized (Doyle [2019] 2021: 13).

> to wear masks, raincoats, and hats and to take them off at the home entrance. A friend working at the nuclear power plant said that it was better to evacuate; the family doctor, a gynaecologist, suggested a pregnant woman evacuate; a mother believed to go out [safely] as long as she did not know the contamination status because the evacuation measures for that area had not been issued, yet (Yoshida 2018: 13-14).

Ono Izumi is concerned about the pregnancy that challenges the integrity of her body for two reasons: as any mother, she hopes her pregnancy will go smoothly; as a Fukushima evacuee, she fears becoming the incubator of a superhuman hybrid, the generator of biological deviance. Ultimately, she is afraid to carry on a product of atomic monstrosity. Only in the final scene is the protagonist, by stripping herself of all precautions, able to live her pregnancy peacefully and, above all, acquire a new individuality, this time characterized by an adaptive and resilient attitude.

Both Hayashi and Sion's productions denounce the agency of radioactivity in deconstructing the female body as a mere reproductive resource. They offer an emerging vision: its reconstruction as a woman-individual, free from its uterine essentialism.

6. Conclusion

Is the concept of *ryōsai kenbo* in 21st-century Japan outdated? It seems that Japan has recently been witnessing a change of course. While it is true that the traditional family is still the norm in Japan, marriages are at an all-time low, as evidenced by the percentages of unmarried women in East Asia between the ages of 35 and 39, with peaks in Japan (Clarke & Haraway 2018: 126-127).

As briefly presented in this study, the posthuman theories argue that the feminine is socially and not biologically constructed (Clarke & Haraway, 2018). Consequently, motherhood is not a gendered performative act. Considering femininity a product of patriarchy implies a gender reconfiguration through the organization of work, including domestic work and the ordering of the family (Federici 2023: 85-86).

Women are defined as such, because they are included within a dominant heterosexual frame. They are represented as reflections of the alterity, that is, everything that men are not; they are essentially defined by their difference from men by their phallogocentric normativity. Women's agency is realized through gendered performativity, no longer bound by biological determinism or patriarchal models but self-defined through conscious and autonomous

choices. I am persuaded that both positions contribute to the definition of the individual, as it is the product of both genetic and environmental factors. If at the biological level atavistic survival drives require the shaping of attitudes, behaviours and *forma mentis* aimed at procreation and nurturing, it is also true that social constructs, the educational system, and sometimes the imposed patriarchal patterns inhibit gender fluidity by conforming the individual to predetermined biocultural labels.

Eventually, the purpose of this study was to reflect on the unique condition of the *hibakusha* women in post-World War II Japan, starting from the hegemonic, patriarchal view based on the critical ideal of *ryōsai kenbo*, which sees the concept of impurity as one of the primary criteria for the ostracism of a-bomb surviving women. For this investigation, postfeminist theories of the monstrous feminine proved particularly illuminating, and the case study of the Hiroshima Maidens then provided tangible evidence of the conflict between conforming to the norm and the quest for emancipation. Moreover, the *ryōsai kenbo*'s legacy was explored through the analysis of Sono Sion's movie *Land of Hope*, which offered fertile ground to reconsider the condition of the *hibakusha* women in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe.

As for the *hibakusha*, their corporal alteration, decay and premature death make them utterly abject: their bodies were corrupted by radiation exposure, thus compromising their integrity. They require constant health checkups, thus conducting a daily life, which is a semi-life, constantly worrying about death. Their life is borderless, liminal, their daily routine suspended in between life and death, and thus associated with monstrosity:

> The monstrous-feminine is a powerfully othered, hybrid figure - a terrorist - whose aim is to undermine or destroy the oppressive, exclusionary, patriarchal order, which produces the world of abject non-human beings, by re-thinking the power of language to construct borders, boundaries, and law (Creed 1993: 192).

The dilemma of the *hibakusha* woman, remains, therefore, unresolved; it remains an open wound, a metaphor for the atomic experience. It is a constant struggle between the desire for acceptance and the need for emancipation. For many women, 6th and 9th August (and 11th March) constituted a turning point. Recognising oneself in the *ryōsai kenbo* model meant regaining an image of identity that radioactivity had wiped out along with family, home and friends. For many, adhering to the norm was equivalent to a return to normality. Their attempt to conceal their traumatic experience is not to blame.

This study offers several examples of *hibakusha* women who questioned their femininity. In the cases of the Hiroshima Maidens and the protagonist of Sono Sion's film, Ono Izumi, the experience of radioactive contamination was intertwined with the search for motherhood. Seemingly contradictory, Hayashi promoted a more emancipated viewpoint even though in her personal life, she had once been married with children.

What did these women claim? Could it be the right to parenthood, jeopardized by prejudice about radiation exposure or conformity to a social ideal that recognized them as individuals only in conformity to their role as wives and mothers? In a contemporary capitalist society, gender roles cannot be measured solely based on productivity (Chodorow [1978] 1999: 208-209). However, suppose this was a yardstick of the individual's attentiveness. In that case, although the Japanese male-dominant society promotes a sexual and familial division of labour. This social asymmetry does not reflect the real contribution of the individual to the community's productive tally.

These women who escaped the annihilation of the radioactivity-exposed cities (Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima) did not manage to perform "a multi-centred and differentiated female subjectivity" (Braidotti [1996] 2021: 25) and give voice to their value as individuals but somehow, they succumbed to social conformism to respond to the role imposed by Japan's allocentric society.

The Hiroshima Maidens' sisterhood proves the psycho-therapeutic value of mutual support and shared experience. Disaster-response studies have proven social support can be a powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma thanks to mutual understanding and the sharing of experience and reciprocity (van der Kolk 2014: 92). Notwithstanding, it was not enough to feel accepted and integrated as a woman-individual in Japanese postwar society. Becoming a wife and mother was an exclusionary criterion, thus forcing these young girls to undergo risky plastic surgeries which would conceal the atomic experience.

Those *hibakusha* women who, like Hayashi Kyōko, courageously embraced other autonomous, independent and differently prolific female identities are emblematic of a society in turmoil. They do not represent alterity (*ijōsei*) as an alien voice in Japanese society, but loudly perform a different femininity (*ijosei*); because diversity is not only freedom; it is also one's true identity.

Acknowledgements This study stems from a doctoral seminar on the themes of alterity, monstrosity and the concept of the feminine held for Ph.D. candidates at the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bologna in June 2023.

References

Braidotti, Rosi. 2021 (1996). *Madri, mostri, macchine*. Roma: Castelvecchi.

Butler, Judith. 2023 (1999). *Questione di genere. Il femminismo e la sovversione dell'identità*. Bari-Roma: Laterza.

Chodorow, Nancy J. 1999 (1978). *The reproduction of mothering*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Clarke, Adele E., & Donna Haraway. 2018. *Making Kin not Population*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The monstrous-feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Crispino, Anna Maria. 2021 (1996). "Introduzione." In Rosi Braidotti, *Madri, mostri, macchine*, 11-18. Roma: Castelvecchi.

De Pieri, Veronica. 2014. *Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Fukushima. La parola come veicolo di memoria*. MA Thesis. Venezia: Cafoscarina.

De Pieri, Veronica. 2023a. *Sequele psicopatologiche in soggetti in utero, infanti e adolescenti esposti ai bombardamenti atomici di Hiroshima e Nagasaki.* Roma: Uninettuno.

De Pieri, Veronica. 2023b. *Radiphobia. Discriminazione sociale verso gli evacuati da Chernobyl' e Fukushima. Una prospettiva comparativa.* Roma: Uninettuno.

Doyle, Jude Ellison. 2021 (2019). *Il mostruoso femminile. Il patriarcato e la paura delle donne*. Roma: Edizioni Tlon.

Federici. Silvia. 2023. *Oltre la periferia della pelle. Ripensare, ricostruire e rivendicare il corpo del capitalismo contemporaneo*. Roma: D Editore.

Freud, Sigmund. 1919. "Das Unheimliche." *Imago* (5)6, 298–324.

Ghigi, Rossella, & Roberta Sassatelli. 2018. *Corpo, genere e società*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Giordano, Paolo. 2012. "L'isola della paura. A Fukushima un anno dopo." *Corriere della Sera*, 26 febbraio 2012.

Graham, Amanda Jane. 2014. "Re-covering the Hiroshima Maidens." In Effie Gemi-Iordanou, Stephen Gordon, Robert Matthew, Ellen McInnes, & Rhiannon Pettitt (eds.), *Medicine, Healing and Performance*, 120-135. Havertown: Oxbow Books.

Haraway, Donna. 2019 (1992). *Le promesse dei mostri. Una politica rigeneratrice per l'alterità inappropriata*. Roma: Edizioni Derive Approdi.

Hersey, John. 1946. *Hiroshima*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Hayashi, Kyōko. 2015a (1975). "Il luogo del rito." In Emanuela Suriano (ed.), *Nagasaki. Racconti dell'atomica*, 87–173. Roma: Carlo Gallucci Editore.

Hayashi, Kyōko. 2015b (1978). "Il barattolo." In Emanuela Suriano (eds.), *Nagasaki. Racconti dell'atomica*, 63–85. Roma: Carlo Gallucci Editore.

Hayashi, Kyōko. 1988. *Giyaman bīdoro*. Tōkyō: Kōdansha.

Hayashi, Kyōko. 1989. *Naki ga gotoki*. Tōkyō: Kōdansha.

Hayashi, Kyōko. 2011. *Hibaku wo ikite - sakuhin to shōgai wo kataru*. Tōkyō: Iwanami shoten.

Ibuse, Masuji. (1965-1966). *Kuroi ame*. Tōkyō: Shinchōsha.

Jacobs, Robert. 2010. "Reconstructing the Perpetrator's Soul by Reconstructing the Victim's Body: The Portrayal of the 'Hiroshima Maidens' by the Mainstream Media in the United States." *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 24, http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue24/jacobs.htm, [last access on 29/04/2024].

Koyama, Shizuko. 2013. *Ryōsai Kenbo. The Educational Ideal of "Good Wife, Wise Mother" in Modern Japan*. Boston: Brill.

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

Lombardi, Anna, Hayashi, Kyōko, 2005. "Kyoko Hayashi: "Io, sopravvissuta a Nagasaki. Ma il terrore non ti lascia mai". *La Repubblica*, 4 August 2015. https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2015/08/05/news/kyoko_hayashi-120432671/ [last access on 29/04/2024].

Mitsuharu, Danno. 2023. "Hibaku jogakusei no sengo- Hayashi Kyōko 'Akikan' ron." *Ishikawa kōgyō kōtō senmongakkō kiyō* 55, 19–30.

Morante, Elsa. 2013 (1987). *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*. Milano: Adelphi.

Nomura-Ichimasa, Shiori. 2019. "Japanese Women in the U.S. and the Formation of Japanese Gender Discourses: Depictions of Ryōsai-Kenbo (Good Wife and Wise Mother) in Japanese Women's Magazines." *Eigo Eibei Bungaku* 59, 87-111.

Raveri, Massimo. 2006. *Itinerari nel sacro. L'esperienza religiosa giapponese*. Venezia: Cafoscarina.

Sharon Sievers. 1983. *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of a Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan.* Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Shimoda, Jirō. 1973 (1904). *Joshi kyōiku*. Tōkyō: Tamagawa Daigaku shuppansha.

Urashima, Mitsuyoshi. 2011. *Hōshano onsen hontō no eikyō wo kangeru. Fukushima to Cherunobiri kara nani wo manabu ka*. Tōkyō: Dojinsensho.

van der Kolk, Bessel. 2014. *The Body keeps the Score. Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. London: Penguin Books.

Wake, Naoko. 2022. "The 'Hiroshima Maidens' on Different Shores: Decentralising Scarred JapaneseFemininity in the A-Bomb Victimhood." *Gender & Hirostory* 34(1), 201–221.

Vyner, Henry M. 1988. *Invisible Trauma. The Psychosocial Effects of the Invisible Environmental Contaminants*. New York: Lexington Books.

Yoshida, Chia. 2018. "'Jūtaku shien' uchikiri - kuikigai hinansha no kunan." *Social Movements* 5, 10–15.