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Homoerotic Desire and Masculine Identity in Tachibana Sotō's Narrative

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Abstract This paper explores two little-known works by Tachibana Sotō (1894–1959), a Japanese author marginal in modernist studies yet briefly mentioned in queer cultural studies. His 1938 novel *Narin Denka heno Kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin), awarded with the Naoki Prize, belongs to mass literature and recounts the friendship between the narrator and an Indian prince in Japan. What initially appears to be the story of a friendship with veiled homoerotic undertones that challenges gender norms in pre-war Japan, then takes on the characteristics of a spy story in which the Japanese protagonist sides with the Indians against British interference. The second text, *Nanshoku Monogatari* (A Tale of Homoerotic Experiences, 1952), adopts a humorous, quasi-confessional style to depict the author's adolescent infatuation with a younger classmate. Published amid the liberalised atmosphere of post-war *kasutori* culture, it revisits the Edo-period tradition of male-male desire (*nanshoku*) while exposing the stigma and contradictions surrounding sexuality in mid-twentieth-century Japan. This paper investigates how Tachibana's fiction negotiates the continuity and rupture between the legacy of *nanshoku*, the moralisation of the war period, and the more tolerant expression of sexuality in the post-war period.

Keywords Tachibana Sotō; *nanshoku*; masculinity; queer culture; *kasutori* magazines.

1. Introduction

Many authors who published prolifically within the realm of *taishū bungaku* (popular literature) remain marginal in scholarly accounts, despite the insights their works offer into the intersections of gender, sexuality, and mass culture. One such neglected figure is Tachibana Sotō (1894–1959), a writer whose career spanned the militarist 1930s and the more liberal post-war decades, mentioned in the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* among the authors who wrote about same-sex relationships before and after the Pacific War, together with Inagaki Taruho and Kawabata Yasunari (Gerstner 2006: 325).[1] Tachibana's works are valuable precisely because they capture the shifting socio-cultural terrain in which discourses of masculinity, sexuality, and national

[1] For an overview of the author, see Yamashita (1995) and Taddei (2022).

identity were negotiated. His 1938 novel *Narin Denka heno Kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin) reflects both the restrictions of a pre-war society marked by censorship and state ideology and the persistence of homoerotic undercurrents that refused to be silenced. His later *Nanshoku Monogatari* (A Tale of Homoerotic Experiences, 1952) belongs to a different cultural atmosphere, one marked by the liberalisation of publishing, the rise of erotic mass magazines (*kasutori zasshi*), and the fragmentation of sexual categories under American occupation.

This article examines the representation of masculinity and homoeroticism in these two works in relation to broader discourses of sexuality in modern Japan. By situating Tachibana within the genealogy of *nanshoku* (male-male desire) traditions, as well as the medical, legal, and cultural debates of the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods, I argue that his fiction embodies the tensions between premodern legacies and modern categories of sexual identity.

Methodologically, this study engages with the cultural and literary history of the modernist period (Tyler 2008) while incorporating insights from queer studies on male homosexuality and constructions of masculinity in pre-war and post-war Japan, as primarily discussed by Miller (2022), Mackintosh (2011), Angles (2011) and McLelland (2005). As for the forms in which male-male eroticism manifested itself in early modern and modern Japan, reference will mainly be made to the studies by Leupp (1995) Pflugfelder (1999) and McLelland (2000).

2. From Edo *Nanshoku* to Meiji pathologisation

The socio-cultural context in which Tachibana grew up and wrote his early works was marked by profound discontinuities in the perception of male-male intimacy. In the Edo period (1603–1867), *nanshoku* (literally 'male colours') referred to erotic and emotional relations between adult men and beautiful youths (*wakashu*), particularly among samurai, monks, and in the milieu of *kabuki* theatre. Such practices were codified, aesthetically celebrated, and narrated in literary works such as Ihara Saikaku's *Nanshoku Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror of Male Love, 1687) or in the fictionalized accounts of love affairs in Buddhist environment belonging to the *Chigo Monogatari* (Stories of the Acolytes) genre, most dating from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) and authored by priests (Schmidt-Hori 2021). These practices were deeply woven into social and aesthetic fabric. The *wakashudō* (way of the youths) emphasised not only erotic enjoyment but also mentorship, loyalty, and ideals of beauty. A

nenja (older partner) was expected to guide and even financially support his *wakashu*, while the latter reciprocated with affection and companionship. Far from being a marginal perversion, *nanshoku* permeated elite culture, temple life, and theatrical traditions. *Nanshoku* was not stigmatised as immoral so long as it coexisted with the expectation of adult men marrying women and producing heirs (Pflugfelder 1999; Leupp 1995).

This long-standing acceptance was destabilised during the Meiji era (1868–1912), when the new nation-state embarked on a project of modernisation modelled upon Western powers. Alongside constitutional and institutional reforms, sexual norms were reorganised around the heterosexual nuclear family as the foundation of the modern state. Non-reproductive sexualities were increasingly stigmatised, not only by imported Christian moralities but also by medical and legal discourses (McLelland 2005).

The translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* into Japanese in 1894 as *Shiki jōkyōhen* introduced medicalized classifications of sexual 'perversions' into public discourse. The Japanese psychiatric field, heavily influenced by German medicine, pathologised same-sex desire as *hentai seiyoku* (perverse sexual desire), contrasting it with a newly valorised norm of reproductive heterosexuality. Although Edo traditions of *nanshoku* persisted in cultural memory, they were re-coded as feudal relics incompatible with modern civilisation (Furukawa & Lockyer 1994).

The legal system reflected this shift. While the 1873 penal code (*Katei ritsuryō*) criminalised sodomy (*keikan*), the revised 1882 penal code (*Keihō*), modelled on French law under Gustave Boissonade, no longer explicitly outlawed homosexual acts except under the category of 'obscenity' when coercion or minors were involved (Pflugfelder 1999). Nevertheless, the brief period of criminalisation left a long-lasting moral stigma, framing male-male sexuality as deviant.

3. Sexuality, eroticism, and censorship in the 1930s

The 1920s and early 1930s witnessed a flourishing of erotic culture, epitomized by the phenomenon of *ero-guro-nansensu* (erotic-grotesque nonsense), which celebrated the bizarre, decadent, and perverse (Silverberg 2006). Writers such as Edogawa Rampo (1894–1965) explored sadomasochism, cross-dressing, and queer desires, often blurring the lines between popular entertainment and avant-garde experimentation.

Interestingly, many of those who condemned male homosexuality were also unable to relinquish the fond memories of their own youthful homoerotic experiences. For instance, Sawada Junjirō (1863–1944), the author of numerous works on heteronormative sexuality, recalls in his book *Shinpi naru Dōseiai* (Mysterious Homosexuality, 1920) his youthful relationships with five boys.

This cultural openness was curtailed as Japan entered a period of militarist mobilization. By the mid-1930s, state censorship intensified. The Special Higher Police (*Tokubetsu kōtō keisatsu*) monitored publications, suppressing discussions on birth control or any sexual practices not aimed at reproduction. The state promoted eugenic policies to ensure healthy reproduction, while propaganda idealized the roles of men as soldiers and women as 'good wives and wise mothers' (*ryōsai kenbo*) (McLelland 2005). Heteronormativity became a pillar of the wartime order, even as the homosocial environments of the military paradoxically fostered same-sex interactions.
This paradox deserves emphasis: while the state silenced open discussions of sexuality, the all-male environments of schools, dormitories, and military barracks provided fertile ground for same-sex intimacy. Scholars note that the very model of male bonding in the army echoed aspects of *wakashudō* even as the official narrative suppressed them (Pflugfelder 1999). It was within this fraught atmosphere that Tachibana published in 1938 *Narin denka heno kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin).

4. Homoeroticism and exoticism in *My memories of Prince Nalin*

My Memories of Prince Nalin is framed as the first-person recollection of Tachibana himself, who befriends a young Indian prince studying in Japan. The prince, Nalin, an 18- or 19-year-old boy, embodies exotic charm, intellectual curiosity, and a feminised beauty that captivates the narrator. Initially dismissive of India and its people, Tachibana gradually comes to sympathise with Nalin against the machinations of the British embassy, which seeks to obstruct his mission.

The text blurs the line between autobiography and fiction, presenting itself as *jitsuwa shōsetsu*, fiction based on real events (Taniguchi 2021). The narrative's emphasis on the narrator's captivation with the prince's androgynous beauty is evident from the very outset of the novel, particularly in Tachibana's recollection of his initial encounter with the prince. Nalin's slender figure evokes statuesque femininity, his skin tone is described with aesthetic

precision and his face is compared to that of a Western prince portrayed in a painting.

> More than his neat and pleasant appearance, I was enchanted by the beauty of his features. He had the face of a young nobleman, kind-hearted and adorable. For the first time in my life, I was amazed that there was such an extraordinarily beautiful boy (*bishōnen*) among the Indians. His face resembled that of a Western prince straight out of a painting. His eyes were black as obsidian, large and bright as one would wish for in a woman (*onna ni mo shite mi ma hoshī kurai*), and he wore glasses for short-sightedness. He had a tapered nose typical of the Aryan race, a round face and a skin colour different from that of the black young men around him. Of course, he was not a white man. He was undoubtedly Indian, but I could describe him as having a very light brown colour with a hint of grey-blue. […]
> I was captivated by the beauty of that young man, whom I devoured with my eyes. The more I looked at him, the more I was consumed by that sensation. In comparison, the skin of a Western woman — banally pale, coarse, and covered with hair — seemed like a fragment of ceramic devoid of any merit. For the first time, I felt that true beauty resided in the refined and "eugenic" Orientals rather than in Caucasians. From time to time, the boy would turn his smiling face toward me or gaze at the traffic outside the window, and his extraordinary elegance eclipsed everything else. […]
> He was in profile and laughed in the typical way of boys, and as I observed his slender figure, I found that he had the feminine beauty (*onna no yōna utsukushisa*) of a magnificent statue of a woman chiselled with meticulous care by a talented sculptor (Tachibana 1977: 9–13).

As evidenced by the passages cited above, the prince's beauty is repeatedly described as feminine, and elsewhere his traditional attire is characterised as flamboyant and overtly feminine (*marude onna no yōna fukusō*) (Tachibana 1977: 38–39). This, in itself, is not particularly novel; rather, it situates the figure of the prince within the long-standing tradition of the beautiful and effeminate youth (*bishōnen*) celebrated in *nanshoku* literature. As proven by Angles (2011), homoerotic attraction to a handsome young man was a fashionable theme that enjoyed success also in modernist literature during the Taishō (1912–1926) and the early decades of the Shōwa era (1926–1989), probably because modernist writers "focused on male-male affection as a kind of backlash or protest against the strong tendency in the Meiji period toward the hetero-normalization of culture and literature" (Tyler 2008: 45–6).

Tachibana himself revisits the trope of the beautiful youth in another short story contemporaneous with *Narin denka*. In *Zushi Monogatari* (A Summer in Zushi,

1937), a ghost tale set in a secluded mountain cemetery, the central figure is the spirit of a twelve-year-old boy — a *bishōnen* whose spectral presence haunts the protagonist. The boy is described in detail at the moment of his first apparition to the narrator, who, significantly, also bears the name Tachibana and is an adult man who has recently been widowed.

> He was bareheaded, and the strands of his glossy black hair swayed like those of a little girl. He had thick eyelashes and large, clear, and lively eyes — though wide open and glistening with tears — pale cheeks, and slender limbs; he was so beautiful that one could easily have mistaken him for a girl (*mattaku onnanoko ni mo mimagaubeki bishōnen deatta*). If I were to find a flaw, I would say that he conveyed an impression of fragility. His *tabi*, the long *kasuri*-patterned kimono with the *obi* tied high around his waist — unsuited to a child, especially in the heavy humidity that heralded the rainy season — made me think of a young actor or a sickly boy (Tachibana 1994: 10).

After a series of agitated encounters, in a half-sleeping state Tachibana finally finds the courage to speak to the ghost of the handsome young man. He tells him that he may visit him whenever he wishes, but only at night, when everyone is asleep, since during the day his strange behaviour would attract attention and people would take him for insane. The young boy nods, and Tachibana remarks: "The boy was so cute, almost like a younger brother, that I felt like I wanted to hold him in my arms" (Tachibana 1994: 52). Considering that, in homoerotic discourse as early as the seventeenth century, the senior partner was referred to as the 'older brother' and the junior as the 'younger brother,' and that the relationship itself was defined as a 'brotherhood bond,' (Leupp 1995: 43) one might wonder whether this desire to embrace the ghost of the young boy does not in fact conceal a form of erotic attraction.

Returning to *My Memories of Prince Nalin*, the narrator oscillates between desire and denial, at one point confessing that his feelings might be interpreted as *hentai seiyoku* (perverse sexual desire). He recalls childhood memories of schoolboys pursuing younger companions (*chigo*), thereby explicitly linking his attraction to Nalin with Edo-period practices of *wakashudō*. Yet he simultaneously invokes the imported term 'sodomy' (*sodomī*), reflecting the ambivalence of an author caught between two discursive regimes — one indigenous and aesthetic, the other modern and pathological.

> Of course, I decided that the next day, the first thing I would do was go visit him, just as I had promised. Telling such a story, people might think I'm some kind of pervert, but ever since we said goodbye in the taxi the

> night before, his handsome face had remained strangely vivid in my mind, and I couldn't forget it.
> When I was in middle school, there was a pimply guy in my group, always flunking and obsessed with baseball, who constantly chased after the younger, good-looking students. After failing so many times, that fool ended up in the same class as his favourite boy, from whom he took math lessons. Thanks to a waitress at a *shiruko* restaurant, I had already had experiences with a woman, and I was foolish enough to believe that it was obscene for a man to pursue another man, that I would never be able to do such a thing nor ever understand it.
> And yet, when my old classmates had all settled down, becoming obedient husbands who no longer got worked up over pretty boys, I suddenly found myself noticing their beauty — and that morning, upon waking, I still saw before my eyes the prince's delicate, almost feminine features.
> I supposed that my state of mind might be a symptom of what is called sodomy,[2] but it was already absurd enough that, at my age, I had come to understand love for young men — and on top of that, the other person was none other than an Indian prince! I couldn't help but laugh to myself, thinking what a shameless man I must be (Tachibana 1977: 38–39).

Thus, the novel stages an attraction that, while never consummated, destabilizes the narrator's masculine identity. However, as the story unfolds, the homoerotic tension is gradually sublimated into friendship and political solidarity, aligning with the demands of wartime Pan-Asianism propaganda.

From this point of view, it could be argued that, while it is true that the narrator's attraction draws on the codes of *nanshoku* revitalised by modernism, the prince becomes the object of what we would today call a colonialist male gaze, unconsciously internalised by the protagonist. From a contemporary postcolonial perspective, the emphasis on the otherness and feminine beauty of the young Indian boy can be understood as an exoticisation and a disempowerment of the other through his feminisation. A process not unlike that which shaped the representation of Japan in Europe and North America between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his essay on Orientalism, Edward Said emphasises how Western representations consistently feminised the East — imagining it as passive, penetrable, and available for conquest — thereby positioning the West as the active and virile subject of history. In *My Memories of Prince Nalin*, the perspective is reversed, yet the sexualized grammar of colonial power remains the same. Here we encounter an adult male born and raised during Japan's period of modernization and Westernisation

[2] In the Japanese text, Tachibana uses the term *nanshoku* and glosses it as *sodomy*.

who, despite the risk of ridicule, asserts his own virility through the feminisation of the body of a young Indian man — a subject of the British Empire and part of that Asia toward which Japanese imperialism was directed.[3]

Nevertheless, the frankness of the narrator's infatuation cannot be ignored. It challenges the state's attempts to enforce heteronormativity, offering readers a glimpse of a 'queer' desire under the guise of exotic adventure.

The trajectory of the novel's planned film adaptation further illustrates the tensions of the era. According to Toyota's research (2011), in 1942, director Satō Takeshi (1903–1978) drafted a screenplay emphasising the prince's ambiguous allure, with the role intended for an actress from the Takarazuka Revue, Takamine Hideko, known for gender-crossing performances. Yet the project was abandoned, likely due to censorship concerns. When revived in 1943, all homoerotic elements were excised, and the story was reframed as a political drama about Indian independence. The transformation from queer subtext to nationalist propaganda epitomises the erasures imposed by wartime ideology.

5. Post-war Japan and the liberalisation of sexual discourse

Japan's defeat in 1945 shattered not only its imperial ambitions but also the ideological edifice that had subordinated sexuality to reproduction and national duty. The American occupation introduced democratic reforms and loosened censorship, creating an unprecedented space for the exploration of sexuality. Literature (*nikutai bungaku*) explores the most macabre, corporeal and decadent aspects of human nature and kissing scenes in films cease to be a taboo. The late 1940s saw the rise of *kasutori zasshi* (cheap magazines), which catered to a mass readership hungry for entertainment.

These ephemeral magazines — often lasting only a few issues — published stories, essays, and letters focusing on erotic themes. One factor that contributed to the proliferation of this erotic material was the fact that SCAP[4]'s censorship policies largely neglected to regulate representations of sexuality, eroticism, or 'obscenity' in general (McLelland 2012: 10).

[3] In this regard, it may be useful to recall Mrinalini Sinha's study (1995) on the figure of the 'effeminate babu,' which demonstrates how colonial masculinity depended on the feminisation of the colonised.

[4] Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. The title held by General Douglas MacArthur during the United States led Allied occupation of Japan following World War II.

The subjects and voices most represented are those of heterosexual men discussing a wide range of sexual practices: sadomasochism, fetishes, masturbation, etc. Female sexuality, on the other hand, is not fully represented or discussed (McLelland 2005).

They also feature articles and publish letters from readers dealing with so-called *hentai seiyoku* 'perverse desires', including homosexual ones. In partial continuity with the pre-war taste for *eroguro nansensu*, they seek out everything that is 'curious, bizarre' (*ryōki*), in terms of sexuality, but generally show a less judgemental attitude towards homosexuality and other non-procreative acts. Unlike pre-war discourses dominated by medical experts, *kasutori* culture allowed ordinary readers to share testimonies and debate desires. Homosexuality was discussed openly, sometimes labelled as a 'perversion,' yet often without moral condemnation.

In his study (2005) McLelland argues that the analysis of hundreds of articles and letters from readers clearly shows that homosexuality at the time was not a defined category and was not clearly differentiated from cross-dressing and transgenderism. There were many terms used by men who recount their homosexual experiences to define themselves. Male homoeroticism was particularly visible through figures such as *danshō* (cross-dressing male prostitutes), also known as *okama*[5], and *gei boi* (effeminate hosts in gay bar) but these occupational and behavioural labels reflected fluid practices rather than fixed identities. To refer to men who engaged in homoerotic relationships, the neologism *danshokuka* was also popular in *kasutori* magazines. Composed of an alternative reading of the characters in the word *nanshoku* combined with the suffix *ka*, it is used by Mishima Yukio in *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours, 1951), a novel that explores themes of homosexual love, obsession, and the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. In this context, *homo*, an abbreviation of *homosekusharu*, was also used as an alternative reading of the characters in the word *dōseai* (same-sex love).

It is also worth noting that, in the post-war period, a work such as *Nanshoku Bunken Shoshi* (Bibliography of Works on Male Homosexuality) by Iwata Jun'ichi (1900–1945) was published. Released in 1956, it constitutes a meticulous catalogue of 1,093 works that deal, more or less explicitly, with *nanshoku*, *shudō*, or *shōnen ai*, ranging from the *Ise Monogatari* (Tales of Ise) of the Heian period (794–1185) to modern novels published up to

[5] A compound word combining the honorific prefix *o* and the word 'ass' (*kama*). A word still in use today with a rather loose meaning, as it can refer to a "cross-dressed and effeminate" man as well as a man "who displays any transgender attribute" (McLelland 2000: 7).

September 1943, the date of the manuscript's completion.[6] This demonstrates that male homosexuality has never been solely a matter concerning minorities, but has long permeated Japanese literary history, intertwining with Western-influenced representations.

6. A teenager's homoerotic desires in *Nanshoku monogatari*

Serialized in *Ōru Yomimono* in 1952, *Nanshoku Monogatari* recounts episodes from the adolescence of a narrator named Tachibana Sotō.[7] Now in his fifties, married and with children, he looks back on the restless years of junior high school — the awakening of his sexuality and his consuming infatuation with a younger classmate, Ryōyama Tadamichi, destined to become a distinguished political scientist. The novel is confessional in form (*shishōsetsu*) and each chapter presents the protagonist's awkward attempts to seduce Ryōyama, culminating in humiliating rejection. The author's stated objective is not to offer an edifying narrative of male–male affection, as the classical-style title might suggest, but rather to recount his own personal experience, in a straightforward yet tragicomic tone, as is evident from the outset of the novel.

> Among my acquaintances, there is a well-known political scientist by the rather formidable name of Ryōyama Tadamichi. […]
> To say he is a "friend" might be misleading, though. In truth, we were friends only many decades ago, back when I was a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old middle-school student. Since then, we have neither spoken nor met, and it is quite possible that he no longer even remembers my existence. Strictly speaking, he was only a childhood friend — someone with whom I have long since lost all connection.
> Be that as it may, this political scientist was once my friend. For many years he served as a professor at the University of Tokyo. After resigning from his post — on some occasion I can no longer recall — he became known as one of the late Prince Konoe's "brains," and during the height of the Pacific War he was invited to serve as an advisor to the military government

[6] Among the modern novels listed are, for instance, *Vita Sexualis* by Mori Ōgai, *Kimi to watashi* (You and I, 1913) by Satomi Ton (1888–1983), and *Nageki no Mon* (The Gate of Lamentation, 1918) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.

[7] This section revisits and further develops my preliminary study (Taddei 2022) on Tachibana Sotō and the representation of homoerotism in *Nanshoku Monogatari*. The conclusions remain valid, and the interpretive framework is briefly outlined here to enable a comparative analysis with *My Memories of Prince Nalin*.

> in the Philippines. After the war, he was among the first to go to America, and even now, his essays — on such weighty topics as "The Nature of the Times and the Course of Reform" or "The Democratic and Dictatorial Aspects of British Diplomacy" — regularly appear at the head of monthly journals. Their content is far too abstruse for someone like me to grasp, but his reputation is such that people even whisper he might be made the secretary-general of some new political party. His name, I imagine, is well known to most readers. […]
> What makes the whole thing the more ridiculous is that I, of all people, never once imagined — not in the wildest dream — that for the next forty years I would shrink and hold my breath on account of this fellow. Back when I was a pimply sixteen-year-old, I actually convinced myself I would make that future, profoundly learned gentleman my little plaything (*chigo san*); I chased him about so relentlessly that in the end I was thrown off so sharply my pimples were practically squeezed flat. It is, frankly, an unforgivable lapse of judgment on my part. Even now, as I take up my pen, I can only stare in amazement at my own stupidity (Tachibana 1995: 6–8).

A noteworthy preliminary observation — reflecting the changing socio-cultural atmosphere of the immediate post-war period — is that, whereas *My Memories of Prince Nalin* presents a fictional narrative in which the protagonist, though sharing the author's name, remains a literary construct, *Nanshoku Monogatari* assumes an overtly autobiographical character. The youthful infatuation depicted is not directed toward an imagined figure but toward a young man who, at the time of publication, was a relatively prominent and readily identifiable individual, given that Tachibana altered his name only slightly. This figure was in fact Rōyama Masamichi (1895–1980), a Japanese political scientist, scholar of public administration, and politician, as well as Professor Emeritus at Ochanomizu University (Yamashita 1995: 365). And one cannot help but wonder how the professor might have felt upon reading the story.

With regard to the theme of *nanshoku*, two tendencies can be observed: on one hand, the traditional feminisation of the desired youth; on the other, a comic inversion of the conventional roles of the adult lover and the young beloved.

Concerning the first aspect, the expression *onna no ko noyō* (like a little girl) recurs in descriptions of the younger companions' physical appearance. This is evident, for instance, in the depiction of the young Ryōyama:

> When he was fifteen or sixteen years old, Ryōyama was a clever, small, and sturdy boy. The seat of his trousers was plump and perky, almost like a little girl's (Tachibana 1995: 8).

A similar emphasis appears in the description of Ogura, another *chigo* who attracts the narrator's attention:

> Of the two *chigo* I acquired this time, Noro was unremarkable, but the one called Ogura was such an exceptionally beautiful boy (*bishōnen*)[8] that he could easily be praised as the finest in the entire school: with his bright, round, almost mixed-race-like eyes, his cool Tokyo accent — far more captivating than that of Momoi or Takahashi — and his thick, girl-like hair (Tachibana 1995: 45).

It is worth noting *en passant* that Ogura's appeal stems not only from the androgynous refinement of his features but also from his *konketsuji no yōna hitomi* (mixed-race-like eyes), which endow his beauty with an additional layer of exotic fascination, evocative of Prince Nalin's allure.

As for the inversion of roles, while traditional *nanshoku* posited a relationship between an older, guiding man (*nenja*) and a younger, beautiful youth (*wakashu*), characterised by mentorship and affection, Tachibana deliberately subverts this model. His narrator, though older than Ryōyama, is depicted as a mischievous and unruly figure, frequently at odds with his parents and plagued by feelings of intellectual inferiority toward Ryōyama, who in turn regards him as a good-for-nothing. Also, the novel abounds in comic scenes of adolescent desire which parody the chivalrous ideals of *wakashudō*: Tachibana offering sweets to lure Ryōyama into intimacy, sketching erotic doodles in class, or begging for sexual favours using slang terms like *okama*.[9] Overall, the attitude of Tachibana toward Ryōyama and the other *chigo* bears a strong resemblance to that of the *kōha* — the group of students who, through coarse behaviour, pursued beautiful youths (*bishōnen*) in school dormitories, as exemplified in Mori Ōgai's *Vita Sexualis* (1909).

The author's style clearly contributes to expressing the emotional instability of the adolescent protagonist, Tachibana. He moves between a desire for conquest and physical control over the *chigo* and moments of loneliness and discouragement caused by the emotional distance of his parents or by the rejection of his young lovers. Instead of analysing his feelings directly, the narrator lets rhythm, repetition, onomatopoeia, and the alternation between the

[8] The word *chigo*, written either in *kanji* or in *katakana*, appears 42 times in the text, compared to *bishōnen*, which occurs only 17 times.

[9] Tachibana employs the term both to denote the partner's anus, which he intends to penetrate, and to refer to a younger, sexually passive lover.

Gunma dialect[10] and more literary expressions convey his emotions. The word thus becomes an embodied gesture rather than a vehicle of reflection, and the apparent vulgarity of the language conceals a profound emotional vulnerability. The mixture of different registers, both refined and popular, tragic and comic, creates a distorted, almost grotesque realism that vividly reveals the narrator's humanity and inner conflict.

Nanshoku Monogatari also reflects the outcomes and influence of the heteronormative debate on sexuality that emerged at the beginning of the century. Indeed, the narrator's adolescence unfolds during the first decade of the twentieth century, a period in which any form of deviation was pathologized. The influence of Meiji-era sexological thought on the life of a provincial adolescent is evident in the episode where the young Tachibana fears being regarded as a pervert should he be caught gazing at a print depicting a handsome samurai during class.

> I never did my homework, spending the entire year researching on people like Ryōyama, Irizawa, or Komaki, who treated Irizawa like his *chigo*... As a result, all the most handsome boys in school and their bosses were meticulously recorded in my notebooks.
> Among them were portraits of beautiful women, poorly executed imitations of the portraits of the then famous Takehisa Yumeji, and among them were also those of others such as Hirata Sangorō[11]. Hirata Sangorō was a young man from Satsuma famous for his beauty, a figure who could be described as representative of early modern homoeroticism. If a teacher had ever found such a notebook, I would undoubtedly have been labelled a pervert (*tōsaku seiyokusha*) (Tachibana 1995: 14–15).

Elsewhere, the incursion of legal discourse into Tachibana's youthful sexual experimentation with younger boys becomes apparent. Following his rejection by Ryōyama, Tachibana engages in sexual intercourse with the young Kuroda, yet he is haunted by the apprehension that his actions may constitute a criminally punishable 'obscene act' involving a minor under the provisions of the *Keihō* penal code.

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[10] *Nanshoku Monogatari* refers to the years when Tachibana attended the former Takasaki Junior High School, in the city of Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture (Yamashita 1995: 355). This explains the presence of linguistic elements from the local dialect, especially in the lively dialogues among the boys or in the passages where the narrator expresses feelings of anger or surprise.

[11] A famous *bishōnen* from Satsuma who lived in the 16th century and represented the *nanshoku* of the early modern age in the Samurai world (Pflugfelder 1999: 209–10).

> Does it mean that I, who was so stirred up by the breakdown of my "first marriage" to Ryōyama, have consciously committed a rape? If you peruse the Criminal Code in the Six Laws of Japan, you will find that in Article 176, "A person who commits an indecent act against a man or woman 13 years of age or older by assault or threat of assault shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to seven years". Kuroda was 16 and I was 17 at the time, so at the age of 17 I had committed a crime that would be punishable with seven years' imprisonment (Tachibana 1995: 24).

The narrator's deployment of humour further underscores the absurdity of medical anxieties and satirizes pseudoscientific conceptions of sexual exhaustion. For instance, when excessive masturbation is thought to be impairing young Tachibana's eyesight, he is prescribed lamprey meat as a preventive measure against suffering a fate akin to that of the *shōgun* Tokugawa Ienari, who was allegedly claimed by death due to excessive sexual activity (Tachibana 1995: 29).

Overall, the novel parodies both the solemn ideals of *wakashudō* and the pathologizing discourse of modern sexology and, with an almost naive frankness, it does not censor the most carnal and vulgar aspects of the protagonist's homoerotic adventures. In this respect, *Nanshoku Monogatari* contrasts sharply, for example, with *Shōnen* (The Adolescent, 1948–49) by Kawabata Yasunari. Written a few years earlier in the same cultural climate, the novel emphasises a more aestheticized and melancholic love between students, highlighting purity rather than carnality. Kawabata's protagonist insists on sublimating erotic attraction into artistic or spiritual admiration, showing the internalisation of the modern stigma on forms of 'sexual deviance', "as if attempting to draw an implicit distinction between the crushes he felt and the erotic behaviour sexologists condemned" (Angles 2011: 20).[12]

Nevertheless, both works limit the homosexual experience to adolescence. Tachibana, the adult narrator, is presented as a heterosexual man, and his 'queer' desires are relegated to youthful recklessness. This approach allows for frankness, but also seems to reinforce heteronormativity: homosexual desire is

[12] A vision similar to that of Kawabata also emerges in Inagaki Taruho's *Shōnen'ai no Bigaku* (The Aesthetics of the Love of Boys, 1968). This seminal essay explores the theme of aesthetic and spiritual attraction to young boys, treating it not as a matter of sexuality but as an ideal of beauty and purity. Drawing on both classical Greek and Japanese traditions, Inagaki conceptualizes *shōnen ai* (boy love) as a form of aesthetic contemplation — an appreciation of youth, innocence, and artistic inspiration. Rather than focusing on erotic desire, he frames this attraction as a metaphysical and artistic experience, linking it to the pursuit of beauty, creativity, and transcendence.

remembered with nostalgia but, as far as the narrator tells us, denied in its continuity into adulthood. The ending leaves readers to imagine what emotions and memories the encounter with Ryōyama might have stirred in Tachibana after so many years. He happens to catch sight of Ryōyama on a train and, startled, hastily steps off to avoid being seen. The brief encounter leaves him so deeply shaken that even Ponta — the geisha at his side, whom he dreams of marrying by redeeming her from her life — senses his turmoil and quietly decides to leave him.

Thus, while the relatively liberal post-war climate and the *kasutori* magazines permitted a less moralizing discourse on male homosexuality — partly due to the absence of its criminalization[13] — *Nanshoku Monogatari* exploits this permissiveness to construct narratives of adolescent homosexual desire with humour and candour. Nevertheless, these narratives remain confined within the heteronormative framework of adult sexuality, reflecting the enduring influence of dominant sexual discourses on the formation of individual subjectivity.

7. Conclusion

Tachibana Sotō's fiction offers a subtle and insightful look at how sexuality and homoerotic desire were negotiated within twentieth-century Japanese culture. *My Memories of Prince Nalin* captures the conflicting forces of the 1930s, intertwining non-heteronormative desire, nationalist ideals, and traces of the older *nanshoku* tradition. The protagonist initially seems to feel a genuine homoerotic attraction to the young prince, whose feminine and exotic features are highlighted, as suggested by the vocabulary used and the protagonist's candid admission that it might involve 'sodomy.' However, this possibility is ironically dismissed by protagonist and the second part of the story reframes the relationship as a friendship, positioning Tachibana on the side of the Indians against British machinations.

In contrast, *Nanshoku Monogatari* reflects the post-war atmosphere of greater sexual freedom, portraying adolescent homosexual experiences with humour and honesty. Homoerotic desire is not merely hinted at as a possibility, but is recounted openly, even in its more physical dimensions. Yet, despite the

[13] Article 14 of the 1947 Constitution was even progressive for the time, outlawing discrimination on the basis of "race, creed, sex, social status or family origin" (McLelland 2012: 6).

protagonist's early infatuations with classmates and his discovery of sexuality through them — which he claims shaped both his adolescence and adult life — these experiences appear confined to the memory of an adult who leads an apparently heterosexual life.

It cannot be excluded that Tachibana's marginal position within the literary field afforded him greater freedom in addressing the theme of homoerotic attraction, thereby challenging its aestheticized conception within modern Japanese literature. The works examined demonstrate with particular clarity that the construction and representation of the protagonists' gender identities — adult heterosexual men — inevitably intersect with social norms that, though initially repressive and later more permissive, nonetheless continue to marginalize homoerotic experience or confine it to a transitory phase in the individual's life course.

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