

BEARING THE CHILDREN OF HUMANKIND:
SEX AND REPRODUCTION IN JAPANESE WOMEN WRITERS' DYSTOPIAN FICTION

by

YUE WANG

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Examining Committee:

Christina Yi, Associate Professor, Asian Studies, UBC

Supervisor

Sharalyn Orbaugh, Professor, Asian Studies, UBC

Co-Supervisor

Colleen Laird, Assistant Professor, Asian Studies, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

The birthrate decline (*shōshika*) of Japan is seen as a social crisis that may, without intervention, lead to drastic population decline and eventually the extinction of humans in Japan. While policies that support working parents have been implemented since the 1990s, many still believe that *shōshika* is caused and exacerbated by women not carrying out their reproductive and caretaking duties. In response, contemporary women writers Kawakami Hiromi (b. 1958) and Murata Sayaka (b. 1979) have created reproductive dystopias where reproductive continuity is held up as a social priority and people are seen as literal spawning machines. This thesis concentrates on the utopian urges and dystopian realities in the fiction of Kawakami and Murata, and in particular women's roles in these pronatalist systems.

In the introduction, I define dystopia as an apocalyptic imagination that is systematically planned and controlled by means of violence and dehumanization, and then examine its utopian impulses. In Chapter One, I focus on Kawakami's *Do Not be Snatched by the Great Bird* (*Ōkina tori ni sarawarenaiyō*, 2016), tracing the evolution of its dystopia through the eyes of female characters and their nonnormative sexual experiences in order to unpack society's utopian desire for stability and the dystopian reality of dehumanization. In Chapter Two, I read Murata's *Dwindling World* (*Shōmetsu sekai*, 2015) as a dismantlement of existing heteronormativity, the sexual order, and reproductivity. The utopian impulse for total reproductive efficiency leads to the totalitarian city of Eden, which demands that everyone be a child-bearer. In both texts, women who are doubly oppressed by patriarchy and dystopia have non-reproductive sex with taboo partners, thereby disturbing pronatalist ideologies. These narratives underscore and critique existing patriarchal structures, gender inequities, and heteronormativity in contemporary Japan and question the desirability for total reproductive efficiency.

Lay Summary

Writers imagine dystopias—bad, insufferable societies—in order to grapple with social anxieties and raise political critique. This thesis explores how Japanese women writers respond to contemporary sexism provoked by a birthrate decline crisis that presumes women’s roles to be child-bearing machines and caretakers. By examining dystopian representations, sexuality, and reproduction in Kawakami Hiromi’s *Do Not be Snatched by the Great Bird* (*Ōkina tori ni sarawarenaiyō*, 2016) and Murata Sayaka’s *Dwindling World* (*Shōmetsu sekai*, 2015), I argue that female characters resist procreative ideologies by having nonreproductive sex with taboo partners. Additionally, both texts show that the utopian urge for perfection and total efficiency can easily be inverted to produce dehumanizing, immoral dystopias.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Yue Wang.

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My grandma told me many stories. She used to be an accountant working in a factory in China during the 50s and 60s. She was pregnant with my mom, and witnessed many political movements come and go like tides. People were fighting for one goal—the ultimate working efficiency in order to be the best in the world. It was a unique time, and we do not live in that time anymore. Yet we continue to live in an era of gender inequity, sexism, and misogyny. The patriarchal system now controls the individual in more insidious, harmful ways. Therefore, my grandma’s stories inspired me to think about what it means to be a woman living in a bad place—a dystopia.

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Dedication

To all the resilient women living in dystopias,

May you be strong and heard.

May you break the wall.

Introduction

In a 2007 prefectural assembly, the then Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan Yanagisawa Hakuo delivered a speech on social welfare. Referring to Japan's social issue of declining birthrates (*shōshika mondai*), Yanagisawa claimed that “the number of women between 15 to 50 years old will not change” and that because “the number of child-bearing machines (*umu kikai*) is fixed, all we can do is to ask each of them to work harder.”¹ Although he later apologized for calling women “child-bearing machines” during his talk, his analogy received neither objection from the audience at the time nor expurgation from the event organizers (*Asahi*). Subsequently, however, his remark quickly fomented public discontent and harsh criticism, especially from feminist groups. The Women's Studies Association of Japan issued an appeal regarding Yanagisawa's “women as child-bearing machines” analogy, arguing that this mentality dehumanizes women, shows dangerous signs of sexism and human rights abuse, and unjustly blames women for the drop in birthrates.²

It is right to be indignant when we hear remarks that reduce women to spawning machines, and yet it is also important to recognize the socio-cultural context in which various forces collectively drive some into thinking that a consistent decline in birthrates can be solved by persuading more women to have children. In 2020, Japan reached its lowest fertility rate since 2007 (*Nikkei*). According to a 2019 CNN report, while Japan's population in 2018 stands at 124 million, by 2065 it is expected to shrink to approximately 88 million (Jozuka et al). Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō has called the amalgam of declining birthrates and aging issues (*shōshi kōreika*) a “national crisis” (*Asahi Shinbun* editorial).

¹ All translations are mine unless specified.

² See <https://joseigakkai-jp.org/appeal/221/> for the original appeal in Japanese.

In a study on declining birthrates (*shōshika*) in Japan, Matsuda Shigeki summarizes its negative socio-economic impacts as including burdens on the already unsustainable pension system, decrease in consumer activities, domination of elderly people in voting, and insufficient numbers in the working population (8-11). To resolve this social crisis, Matsuda argues that Japan needs a “paradigm shift” (224) consisting of improving the hiring environment for young workers; ameliorating the economic burden of having, raising, and educating children; as well as supporting working parents, especially mothers (225-238). Still, the sexist opinion lingers: it is because women are choosing their jobs over their supposed duties such as marriage and pregnancy that *shōshika* worsens. The perpetuation of this opinion is what allowed Yanagisawa to make comments such as the one above.

In the midst of debates on policies that could mitigate such an apocalyptic crisis, the “women-as-wombs” mentality reveals systematic sexism that persistently simplifies the relationship between biological sex and gender and reinforces dichotomic gender roles. In this patriarchal context, a woman carries many responsibilities: she must marry a man and have children and take care of her family and household because her body directly situates her role in society as a wife and a mother.

While this mentality continues to presume and formulate a woman’s image and presence in favor of patriarchy, many women writers have responded to sexism by imagining alternative worlds within which to contemplate humankind’s responsibility and the gendered aspects of political, social, and reproductive justice. By extending the “women-as-wombs” way of thinking to a bleak fictional society which craves total reproductive efficiency and forces women to play the role of wombs, these women writers expose the absurdity of the sexist ideology that blames women alone for the *shōshika* crisis. Among them are Kawakami Hiromi (b. 1958) and Murata

Sayaka (b. 1979), both prolific contemporary writers working on women's gender, sexuality, and reproduction in dystopian worlds. Kawakami is famous for her depictions of the animalized, anthropomorphized, and mythologized "others," who are often female beings abused by human men in her fantastic stories.³ Her 2016 short story collection *Do Not be Snatched by the Great Bird* (*Ōkina tori ni sarawarenaiyō*, referred to in this thesis as *The Great Bird*) inhabits a clearly dystopian setting, where girls are forced into consecutive rapes and pregnancies under the supervision of artificial intelligence (AI) Mothers in the hope of boosting the population of men, who experience a higher death rate. Women resist the pronatalist ideology that presumes their roles as birth machines by having intercourse out of curiosity and pleasure. Yet, the pursuit of reproductive efficiency eventually leads humans to a future where humanity has lost its ability to reproduce and children are made in factories.

Murata Sayaka, on the other hand, creates fictional societies that are often called "dystopian"⁴ by her readers for their collective, homogeneous, and totalitarian features. In her 2015 novel *Dwindling World* (*Shōmetsu sekai*), the protagonist Amane lives in a society where intercourse is being gradually replaced by artificial insemination. She then moves to a city called Eden, where everyone—regardless of their biological sex—participate in an endless cycle of pregnancies and childbirth via artificial insemination and artificial uteri. Amane and her husband both give birth, but only her husband's child survives. In the end, Amane has non-reproductive intercourse with a taboo partner—an Eden child—and devolves into an ambiguous state of self-dehumanization.

³ For example, see "Hokusai" and "Seahorse" ("Kaiba") in *The Palace of Dragon King* (*Ryūgū*) (*Bungei Shunjū*, 2002) and "Drowning" ("Oboreru") (*Bungei Shunjū*, 1999).

⁴ See Murata's interview on the Cheltenham Literature Festival at <https://cheltenhamliteraturefestival.com/>.

Both authors present us with chilling alternative realities, where totalitarian patriarchy has become the norm. Despite the utopian promise that strives for reproductive stability and efficiency in order to save humankind from extinction, women's reproductive capacities are exploited to their extreme. Oppressed in this way by institutionalized patriarchy and dystopia, the women in Kawakami's and Murata's fiction have nonconforming sexual encounters, resist gender codes, and challenge the domination of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Their stories show that utopias and dystopia co-exist as one entity—like a Mobius strip—and can be easily reversed to be the other.⁵ By writing dystopias, Kawakami and Murata are able to comment on current social and political trends and offer a warning that utopian urges such as total reproductive efficiency as a *shōshika* solution will easily lead to dehumanizing and dystopian realities.

Women in Dystopias

Examining dystopia necessitates an investigation of its content, form, and function, as Ruth Levitas has argued in *The Concept of Utopia* (1990). Gregory Claeys, in *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), offers a literary approach which explores authorial intention, presumed reader's context and response, and content interwoven with the interpreter's perspective (291). Yet a study on dystopia cannot start without asking the question: what is a dystopia?

⁵ The dynamic between utopias and dystopias is best described by Erika Gottlieb in a cross-cultural comparative study of dystopian fiction as “the push and pull between utopian and dystopian perspectives” (8). Gottlieb detects the utopian dreams embedded in dystopian classics such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Indeed, it depends on the character's and reader's perspectives to determine whether the diegetic society/text is a utopian or dystopian one, as Rothstein writes, “One man's utopia is another man's dystopia” (4). Likewise, Margaret Atwood invents the term “ustopia” to highlight the mutual inclusivity of utopias and dystopias.

The existence of dystopia in media has fascinated audiences and motivated many scholars to attempt pinpoint its essence. Is it the direct opposite of utopia, the impeccable fantasyland? Is it a literary/visual genre on its own, or a subgenre of utopianism, as Lucy Sargisson claims in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (2)? Is it an “impulse,” in Keith Booker’s words, that addresses sociocultural anxieties and nightmares constituted by real-life warfare and technological abuse (3)?

In *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Gregory Claeys writes that “dystopia” is etymologically connected to two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning a “diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavorable place” (5). Three types of dystopia are identified: the political, the environmental, and the technological, and the three categories are mutually inclusive (6). Susan Napier, in discussing the utopian and dystopian representations in modern Japanese literature, similarly writes that Japanese dystopias “share their visions of an absurd quest, a problematization of history and technology, and bleak urban imagery with much postmodern and dystopian literature in the West” (182). Two major visions prevail in these contemporary dystopias: technology gone amok and totalitarian governments manipulating such technology (183). In any case, dystopia presents itself to be an undesirable place filled with the violence, fear, anguish, and calamity of disasters and warfare.

To qualify as a dystopia in this thesis, a society must include the following features, which can easily overlap. First of all, a dystopia always gestures to some type of apocalypse. While apocalypse in fiction disrupts order and linearity and reveals the Other within us during unstable times, as Motoko Tanaka has observed (26-30), dystopia either utilizes fear towards an upcoming apocalypse and demands obedience to avoid it, or else maneuvers the trauma and memories of a past catastrophe in a post-apocalyptic world and orders compliance to prevent a

second one. When everyone stays in survival mode, it is easy for the dystopia to dismantle established morality and build new systems in accordance with its interests, and draw the line between what is considered us and the “other” in order to expel the latter and survive. The apocalypse in both Kawakami’s and Murata’s stories is centered on the threat of human extinction. It is clear that their dystopias are making every effort to exaggerate the urgency of increasing childbirth for survival. These dystopias are also gendered in the sense that they target women by presuming their roles as child-bearers and pressuring them to solve the crisis.

Secondly, a dystopia must be planned by some central power in order to deprive the individual of choice and thereby ensure stability. Margaret Atwood, while discussing her dystopian classic *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) in 2016, has argued that to qualify as a dystopia, a society must be “deliberately planned and arranged” (13). As Aaron Rosenfeld also points out, classical dystopias usually push homogeneity to its extreme and leave only a singular perspective for characters and readers (10). Singularity leads to stability, which makes the society easier to plan and control. Stability does not necessarily signify a quiet, peaceful, static social landscape, for in some fiction, consistent destruction can also constitute a stable pattern. In Kawakami’s world, the girls live in a society planned by AI Mothers and human clone Watchers and are told that they have no choice but to give birth. In Murata’s *Eden*, all insemination, pregnancy, miscarriage, and childbirth are monitored by computers and controlled by the government. To enjoy sexual intercourse or to claim personal bonds with your child is not an option.

The third element includes violence and dehumanization. Violence has many forms besides physical violence. Its invisible version manifests in many ways, such as breaching personal boundaries and having total access to one’s private information or one’s body. In

particular, the violent eradication of inefficiencies such as envy, avarice, fear, and bigotry that could hinder a perfect and happy community is a common theme. As Rosenfeld notes,

The suspicion that progress depends on dehumanization—that universal freedom and happiness will require the sacrifice of inefficiencies, including political and moral inefficiencies that were previously portrayed as essential to the human character—becomes the guiding principle of the classic twentieth century anti-utopian dystopias (7).

In both *The Great Bird* and *Dwindling World*, the choice of not giving birth is violently removed through supervision and coercion by AI Mothers and Eden. The target of such violent dehumanization is women, whose bodies become resources necessary for solving humanity's crisis.

Finally, each dystopia has a utopian side to it. Rosenfeld's comment above acknowledges a common trend in u/dystopian works of utopian ambitions resulting in dystopian realities. To understand dystopia, it is crucial to understand the related concepts of utopia and eutopia. Most scholars agree that the term utopia, simplistically speaking, means an idealistic "no place"—a place that cannot be found⁶ or that does not exist (Firchow 1), and eutopia a good place, possibly better than our existing society (Bhavnani and Foran 319). This distinction in word choice has been adopted by many scholars in u/dystopian studies to specify the connotation of the terms. Utopia and eutopia must be differentiated from each other because many utopian studies scholars recognize and struggle with the limitations, impossibility, and totalitarianism embedded in utopia and utopianism. Tom Moylan argues that utopia, as a perfect alternative, must exist outside the author's current place or time (3), though the author is still writing within existing social order and paradigms (39). It is thus no wonder that utopian imagination has limitations on itself, that ultimate perfection can never be achieved, that "there can be no utopia" (28). Hence, the term

⁶ "Found" in the sense that it can be located and/or established in reality.

eutopia can be used to describe a society's efforts to better itself in a pragmatic way. More importantly, people of different genders do not necessarily have the same experience in dystopias. Elaine Baruch examines male domination in utopias written by men and for men from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)⁷ and concludes that "utopias for men are often dystopias for women" (193). Kawakami and Murata write from within a male-dominated society about dystopias and show that men and women are oppressed in different ways.

Angela Yiu is one scholar who has diagnosed the reversibility between utopias and dystopias in modern literature in a Japanese studies context (17-18). While the colloquial understanding is that dystopia stands in fixed opposition to utopia, I follow Yiu's steps and propose the Mobius strip image to illustrate the relationship between utopias and dystopias. Utopias and dystopias have a dynamic, fluid, and developing impact on each other and can be understood as existing as one entity. What also needs to be emphasized is the danger of utopian impulses. As discussed in previous paragraphs, utopian studies scholars have debunked the myth of utopia being a perfect no-where and shown how excessive perfection and homogeneity can lead to totalitarianism in practice. Both Kawakami's and Murata's stories demonstrate the destructive impact of realizing a utopia at the cost of uniqueness, individuality, and choice.

Writers imagine bleak visions of an insufferable society not only to provoke fear of the unknown and the unpredictable but also to send warnings and engage in social critique. Many dystopian themes and motifs have undoubtedly appeared in history and shaped our lives nowadays. Social issues such as racism, sexism, classism, and human rights abuses continue to

⁷ Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often read and analyzed a dystopian text, it can be argued that the diegetic society is a stable and efficient utopia for those in power. In other words, Baruch points out that a dystopia for some people can be a utopia for others.

appear in dystopias as intrinsic elements of draconian systems in pursuit of stability. In this sense, stories of dystopias send warnings as “prophetic vehicle[s]” against “terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia’s underside,” as Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan note (2-3).

In this thesis, I analyze stories of dystopia by tracing their characters’ development and storyline, and their function by delving into their effect. I treat dystopias as not a subgenre of science fiction but rather a convincing possibility, an extrapolation into literature of dark visions based on historical realities. Although dystopian themes such as posthumanism, cyberpunk, ecological catastrophe, and apocalypse in Japanese popular culture have been studied extensively,⁸ there are comparatively fewer studies on contemporary Japanese fiction, especially those written by contemporary women writers⁹ through the lens of dystopian studies. Thus, this thesis strives to elucidate dystopian representations and the ways they decode contemporary social anxieties.

Women Writing Dystopias

Control of women’s bodies and sexualities during dystopian times has not been unprecedented in history. In 1939, the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare issued the didactic “Ten Lessons of Marriage” (*kekkon jūkun*), in which a slogan of “Give Birth and Multiply” (*umeyo fuyaseyo*) quickly made its way to newspapers and advertisements. In 1941,

⁸ For more information, see Susan Napier’s *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Peter Paik’s *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Steven Brown’s *Tokyo Cyberpunk: Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); and Motoko Tanaka’s *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁹ Keith Booker included Abe Kōbō (1924-1993) and Murakami Haruki (b. 1949) in a survey of dystopian literature (1994). Angela Yiu and Susan Napier have published on dystopian stories written by modern and contemporary Japanese authors who are/were mostly male.

The Guideline of Population Policies (jinkō seisaku kakuritsu yōkō) was published in the effort of maintaining a stable and “high quality” population for wartime labor (Takeda 86-87).

Christiana Norgren has also argued that birth control and procreative population management show eugenic ideologies, that only the “fit” shall bear more children for the good of the nation during wars—planned, authoritarian, and violent dystopias.

Although present-day Japan is not technically at war, it faces another crisis of birthrate decline and rapid aging issues. The sexism that condones Yanagisawa’s comments and sees women as wombs for the nation has not disappeared. In response, women writers such as Kawakami Hiromi and Murata Sayaka imagine contemporary reproductive dystopias. Kawakami first gained widespread attention in the literary world with the publication of her award-winning short story “God Bless You” (“Kamisama,” 1994).¹⁰ She is loved for her fictional allegories which often merge everyday life and a magically realist world with an “other” at the center.¹¹ This “other” can be anthropomorphized and feminized animals, mythological beings derived from folklore and premodern literature, or artificial intelligence. In some stories, this “other” is a female other-than-human being who suffers from physical/sexual abuse by male humans.¹² The experience of the female “others” documents their love, marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, highlighting the double othering of women in cross-species heterosexual relationships. In *The Great Bird*, Kawakami develops an explicitly dystopian world by writing stories of planning and dehumanization, and once again, making women the suffering other. Kawakami’s “other,” in *The*

¹⁰ Research on Kawakami in English is mainly focused on “God Bless You” and its rewrite “God Bless You 2011” after the Triple Disaster in 2011. See Rachel DiNitto’s *Fukushima Fiction: The Literary Landscape of Japan’s Triple Disaster* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2019) and Linda Flores’ “Matrices of Time, Space, and Text: Intertextuality and Trauma in Two 3.11 Narratives” from *Japan Review*, no. 31, 2017, pp. 141-169.

¹¹ Li Xianrui recognizes and praises Kawakami’s skillful creation of the “other” (31).

¹² See “Sea Rocks” (“Ikuri”) from *Ghost of the Pasta Machine (Pasuta mashiin no yūrei*, 2010) and “Seahorse” (“Kaiba”) from *The Palace of Dragon King (Ryūgū*, 2002).

Great Bird and other fiction, blurs the boundaries between humans and other beings, comments on bigotry and misogyny, and interrogates what it means to be human.

Murata Sayaka, in comparison, is celebrated for her dystopian imaginations. She debuted in 2003 and gained public recognition in 2016 after writing the immensely popular and award-winning *Convenience Store Woman* (*Konbini ningen*, 2016). Murata has received scholarly attention for her writings on sex, reproduction, and governmental control in alternative societies such as *The Birth Murder System* (*Satsujin shussan*, 2014). Anna Specchio, for example, praises the society in *The Birth Murder System* where everyone regardless of sex can give birth via artificial insemination and uteri for being a “feminist reproductive eutopian dystopia” (94) that dismantles gender norms and liberates women from their reproductive roles.

Both Kawakami and Murata are writing from within this social context of birthrate decline and its related concerns around gender inequality and reproductive rights. Kawakami’s *The Great Bird* is set in a world where the declining population cannot sustain and support lives anymore and therefore, clones and AI have decided to intervene. In contrast, Murata’s *Dwindling World* depicts a world where sexual intercourse is prohibited, and the government has built a city called Eden in order to encourage more births. Both apocalyptic views of humans losing the ability and capacity to reproduce demonstrate contemporary anxieties brought by declining birthrates and urge us to wonder: what if humanity really collapses? Will our endeavors to prevent such a future lead us to another nightmare, especially for women?

This type of work that showcases conflicts derived from gender and power imbalances has many names. Nonetheless, perhaps the most widely used term is “feminist dystopia,”¹³ which

¹³ For more information on feminist utopias, see Frances Bartkowski’s *Feminist Utopias* (University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

“ultimately describes female empowerment’s precarious position in a sexual...landscape of nonnormativity and offers a way to visualize oppositional practices that do not readily correspond to liberation” (Howard 42).

U/dystopias engage in control over sexuality because sexuality and love are “destabilizing phenomena” that writers readily recognize, as Eric Rabkin remarks (3-4). In evaluating classic dystopias, Rabkin detects two methods that writers adopt to deal with the disruptive nature of sex. The first one is to deem sex so “frequent and so mechanical that it will not generate any love,” and the second strategy is to suppress sex through education and shaming (3-6). We see these practices in both texts, where women in *The Great Bird* go through numbing pregnancies and births, and Amane from *Dwindling World* suffers from social stigma and shame because her parents chose intercourse over artificial insemination to have her.

While Rabkin is mostly interested in unpacking dystopias written by men and for men, in which women tend to be sexual and yet voiceless beings exploited by the male lead or appearing to assist him, I argue that dystopias written by women and about women have nuanced ways to envisage agency and resistance. It is crucial to acknowledge that resistance does not necessarily always stand in opposition to the system. In other words, what is resistant may not be anti-hegemonic, and someone nonconforming may be complicit with the system to oppress someone else. In some scenarios, what is called “rebellion” could easily produce “repressive satisfaction,” as is pointed out by Sandra Bartky. According to Bartky, the false feeling of having rebelled “fastens us to the established order of domination, for the same system which produces false needs also controls the conditions under which such needs can be satisfied” (42). Resistance can be discovered in both texts, and although such rebellions sometimes disobey the pronatalist

systems, they are not always transgressive and productive in the sense that they do not automatically lead to the demolition of the reproductive dystopias.

Nonetheless, since feminist dystopias tend to reduce women to wombs and delineate the realm of “proper”—procreative—sexualities and sexual acts, women’s decisions to love their children, perform non-reproductive sexual activities, have intercourse with what is considered to be “nonhuman” or national resources such as children can be deemed disruptive. Although not every female character is aware of and consciously rebels against the dystopian oppression and some such as the AI Mothers utilize motherhood for suppressive purposes, many still have a rebellious heart. Their rebellions resonate with readers, for they powerfully reveal and display the destructiveness of toxic patriarchal and dystopian ruling as well as the violent breach of women’s bodily boundaries for the “greater good” of humankind.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One focuses primarily on four selected stories from Kawakami’s *The Great Bird*. The stories told from the point of view of different female characters collectively picture a dystopia that specifically targets women’s reproductive capacities and reinforces their gender roles as child-bearers and domestic caretakers. In a world where humans are gradually losing their capability to reproduce, artificial intelligence machines become “Mothers” (*haha*) and begin to supervise and ensure reproductive efficiency, whereas certain groups of humans based on genetic eligibility will become “Watchers” (*mimamori*) and record and regulate the population. Several female characters, although being doubly oppressed by the patriarchy and dystopia, have sexual intercourse either for nonreproductive reasons or with taboo partners, thus defying the procreative ideologies. Nonetheless, none of them are able to break out of the reproductive system. Thousands of years later in the last story, “Memento,” humans have ceased

to reproduce and women in particular are emancipated from perpetual pregnancies and births. Yet the gendered division that puts women in households with children and men in factories still prevails. In addition, children, plants, and animals are now factory products. By examining the evolution of this world, I argue that Kawakami creates a feminist dystopia by extending the current “women-as-wombs” analogy into the future. Her stories showcase women’s suffering and futile struggles and caution her readers about dehumanization in perfecting reproductive systems.

Chapter Two offers a textual analysis of Murata’s *Dwindling World* and the two societies it presents. The protagonist, Amane, lives in a society where sexual intercourse is being gradually replaced by artificial insemination and considered incestuous if it happens between married partners. Women in particular struggle because they shoulder the burden of having children and balancing their work in order to care for them. Rape threats within families also mark this society as a dystopian place hostile to women. Amane then moves to Eden where everyone becomes a child-bearer and caretaker via artificial reproduction. Eden demonstrates utopian aspects in the sense that it dissolves the line drawn by reproductive capacities and gender roles and involves everyone with the same reproductive and domestic duties. Nonetheless, the totalitarian and dehumanizing aspects of Eden induce Amane to become a criminal, as she has nonreproductive intercourse with an Eden child in order to construct her own sexuality. Murata offers an intercourse-less future where everything revolves around artificial reproduction and asks her readers: if we eliminate sex, will we be able to equalize the reproductive burden on women? If this perfect future comes at the cost of totalitarianism, is it still desirable?

The last chapter concludes the thesis by comparing the two texts and amplifying the main argument. It also elucidates the role of these stories by discussing the function of dystopian literature in general and reader's reception of the two texts. Finally, I expand the thesis scope and offer other possibilities to look at Kawakami and Murata from a posthumanist perspective. The AI Mothers in Kawakami's novel embody sacrificial love that is designed to serve humanity whereas human clones deal with the idea of singularity and individuality in a homogeneous world. In comparison, Murata grapples with anthropocentrism by rendering her characters cyborgs communicating through metaphorical watery images. This approach disrupts bodily boundaries and adds a layer of fluidity to sexuality and humanity.

Chapter One: No Children, No Future: Reproductive Futurism, Non-conforming Sex, and the Utopian Impulse in Kawakami Hiromi's *Do Not be Snatched by the Great Bird* (2016)

In 2014, Kawakami Hiromi (1958-) published the short story “Memento” (“Katami”) in the literary magazine *Gunzō* for a special issue titled *Anthology of Strange Love Stories by Japanese Novelists (Hen'ai shōsetsushū: Nihon sakka hen)*. Told in a wife's soft and sorrowful tone, “Memento” depicts a quiet, tranquil future world where children, as well as food and plants, are made *en masse* in factories. The idea of nation states has vanished; the average life span has drastically shortened; and family bonds have become looser and more flexible. The special issue editor, Kishimoto Sachiko, wrote in the afterword of the anthology that “this story reads like a utopia and its opposite at the same time. There is hope that resembles despair” (Kawakami 408).

Kawakami then expanded the worldview of “Memento” in the short story anthology *Do Not be Snatched by the Great Bird (Ōkina tori ni sarawarenaiyō, referred to as The Great Bird)* in 2016. The anthology starts with “Memento” and includes thirteen other stories narrated by different characters across a span of thousands of years. Generally, the anthology inherits the context explored in “Memento,” that humankind now stands on the edge of extinction due to extremely low birth rates. In *The Great Bird*, the oldest human clones work as the community's memory guardians and supervisors—the “Watchers” (*mimamori*)—alongside evolved Artificial Intelligence, “the Mothers” (*haha-tachi*). Together they establish planned, segregated societies in order to ensure humankind's genetic continuity. In such communities, men travel across borders and impregnate girls whereas women are expected to bear as many children—preferably boys—as possible. Gradually, humankind experiences genetic mutations and evolves into unhuman beings, yet their greed and desire to exclude the “other” continue to push them further into self-destruction. Nonetheless, even after the Mothers abandon humans and self-destruct, human

beings continue to survive, eventually finding a way to produce children in factories and thus arriving at the world of “Memento.”

This chapter will examine four stories in temporal chronological order—“Garden of the Green” (“Midori no niwa”), “The Dancing Child” (“Odoru kodomo”), “Change” (“Henka”), and “Memento”—and analyze the representation of dystopia and female characters through the lens of gender and sexuality. The four societies are deliberately arranged collectively by the Watchers (and their clones) and run by AI Mothers in order to prevent humankind’s extinction. Despite their endeavors, humans continue to decrease in number, and sexual intercourse is reduced to an act solely for the sake of reproduction as depicted in “Garden of the Green.” In “The Dancing Child,” a gender-ambiguous “Child” (*kodomo*), who is later revealed to be a girl, is raised by AI Mothers to be a future Watcher. The Child’s birth is planned, but she always deviates from her tasks in search of freedom. In the next story “Change,” a girl with mind-reading powers utilizes her abilities to rebel against her Mothers who persistently urge her to bear children. Lastly, thousands of years after the Watchers and Mothers decide to resign (*akirameru*) their roles and leave the future in humankind’s own hands, the wives in “Memento” are at last free from the burden to have children for humankind, not because they have fought for this change, but because they are unable to reproduce and children are now manufactured in factories.

The four stories were chosen because they are records of women seeing the utopian impulse and dystopian reality through their own eyes. By tracing the constantly evolving dystopia, Kawakami shows that humankind continues to search for a more stable and efficient way to reproduce, whatever the cost might be. “Garden of the Green” presents a typical feminist dystopia, where women’s reproductive capacities are abused to an extreme. “The Dancing Child,” similarly, tells the same story from the perspective of the Child—a female Watcher—

who used to enjoy the privilege of observing outside the procreative system but becomes reincorporated into it after giving birth to a son. Through these two stories, Kawakami imagines a bleak future where Minister Yanagisawa Hakuo's comments have become the new reality—women have become literal spawning machines—and exposes the immorality of sex-based dehumanization. In “Change,” excessive reproduction and cloning prove to be inefficient, and the protagonist has intercourse with non-human beings out of curiosity and provokes change in the totalitarian and homogeneous society. Kawakami debunks the dominant pronatalist ideology that sex is only for reproduction and shows how sexual contacts can be interpreted as subversive acts against pronatalism. Still, the pursuit for an absolutely perfect society moves forward, and the reader is led to “Memento,” where women and men are liberated from the excruciating reproductive task of giving birth and have seemingly achieved reproductive equality. Nonetheless, the cost of realizing such a utopia is alarming—the unique bonds between parents and children are dissolved, and children, as factory products, are deprived of their individuality and become mere numbers. Kawakami alerts us of the devastating consequences of accomplishing utopian dreams, arguing that our individuality and singular social bonds should be cherished and protected from homogeneity.

Through textual analysis using feminist and u/dystopian studies theories, this chapter seeks to prove how, in gendered dystopias which specifically oppress women and abuse their reproductivity, women are all too often reduced to child-bearing machines and subject to two layers of domination from the dystopian society and patriarchy. Nonetheless, women never give up surviving strategically. By utilizing metaphors for desire and love, claiming their sexual autonomy not for pregnancy but for pleasure, and transcending their reproductive capacities, women subvert the pronatalist sexual order. Their resistance bears great significance for they

complicate the main thematic questions of *The Great Bird*: how we live, love, and hope in dystopias.

“Garden of the Green”: Sex, Her Flowery Body, Love, and Loss

In her influential treatise *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wryly writes, “Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her” (41). Beauvoir points out that one of women’s basic problems is “reconciling the reproductive role and productive work,” and that her “enslavement to the generative function” has confined her to the domestic sphere (168). According to Julia Bullock, when the translation of *The Second Sex* was first introduced to Japan in 1953 by Ikushima Ryōichi, a male professor at Kyōto University, it quickly became popular. However, a group of women academics in the 1960s found Ikushima’s mistranslation of keywords such as “femininity” into “being a woman” (*onna de aru koto*, suggesting that being a woman biologically means being feminine) instead of “being like a woman” (*onna-rashisa*, a term that highlights the social construction of gender) so problematic that they reread *The Second Sex* in French and offered a new translation from a feminist perspective (275-278). Ikushima’s mistranslation makes the boundary drawn by Beauvoir between biological sex and gender roles opaque, reflecting the patriarchal structure that expects a woman to perform “womanly” duties such as bearing children. Postwar feminist critics such as Aoki Yayoi and Kanazumi Fumiko agree that contemporary Japanese society still tightly controls women’s roles by defining them as child-bearers.¹⁴ Kanazumi, a lawyer and activist in the area of violence against women, states

¹⁴ In response to this reproductive system based on women’s subjugation, the postwar women’s liberation movement activists in Japan see women not as a womb but as a subject, arguing that whether to give birth is a woman’s right and should be independent from national management and control, according to Yamane Sumika (187).

that because “the state has appropriated the right to determine matters of reproduction in the interest of fully controlling the population,” women have been “forcibly confined to a procreative sexuality, thus limiting their lives to the resource function of continuous reproduction” (Buckley 82).

The world of “Garden of the Green” bears deep resonances with contemporary Japanese society, which, in order to grapple with a rapidly aging society, demands that women reproduce and multiply. Women in “Garden of the Green” are entirely constrained to the roles of child-bearers and domestic caretakers. The first-person narrator Rien, known as “I” (*atashi*, a pronoun that is gendered feminine) in the story, lives with her mother (*kāsan*), her friend Howa, and Howa’s mother. Rien and Howa grow up learning to care for their garden and obey the generally short-lived visitor men, who must have sex with as many girls as possible before their death. Despite falling in love with one of the male travelers, Kuwan, Rien is thrown into the precarious cycle of incessant pregnancy and childbirth, and is forced by the Mothers to separate from her newborn boy.

The society in this story is planned and supervised by the Watchers and Mothers¹⁵ in the hope of preventing further birthrate decrease. In order to boost births, men are reduced to penises/testicles and women to their ovaries/wombs. Rien tells the readers how she learns about

¹⁵ In later stories such as “Fate” (*Unmei*) and “Remember,” the origin of Watchers and Mothers are clarified. “Fate” is told by an AI Mother prototype, who is called the Big Mother and looks back at the history of AI and humanity. AI was first invented to replace human labor and then unfortunately was used in mass warfare. In the midst of multiple catastrophes, humans gradually decline in number and lower their guards against AI, which has developed intelligence and self-awareness and acquired the ability to self-replicate. Eventually, AI begins to parasitize humans in their abdomen, turning them into joyful nonhuman creatures. In “Remember,” it becomes clear that the oldest human clones are Jacob and Ian. Unlike other clones, they preserve the memories of their origins—those decided to assist Mothers to prevent humankind’s extinction. Jacob proposes a plan that divides humans into segregated groups and assign Watchers to observe (*kansatsu*) and regulate (*chōsetsu*) their genetic composition and mutations.

the function and *raison d'être* of her sexually maturing body and why she should not resist the unknown man who enters her room one night:

The man was standing by my bed. He asked, "Can I join you?"

I couldn't move. My mother taught me that my body would receive his sperm, and just as plants pollinate and make seeds, there was the possibility that my eggs might be penetrated by his sperm and begin dividing. But when that would happen—Tonight? Sometime in the future? Or perhaps such a risky chance would never come around. I did not know.

"Men will decide," my mother said.

"Why? Why can't I be the one to decide?" I asked petulantly.

"A long time ago, women could make decisions either by themselves or by discussing with men because the sex ratio used to be more balanced, not as skewed as now, where there are countless women and only tens of men."

"But why are there more women? Plants are different, aren't they? Most plants have both stamens and pistils, and even those that are either male or female are basically evenly split."

"Because women are stronger."

My mother said women are stronger. But I felt that men are much stronger than me. Pain, humiliation, and a shred of accomplishment filled me. I didn't like what he did, but I liked how he smelt. Like the garden, where the smell of green is strong and dense. (48-50)

This scene shows that Rien, like other girls, is taught to believe that her body and sexuality are in servitude of men and reproduction. The plant as a bodily metaphor is significant because Rien's name comes from the lotus (*ren*) and her body matures as the lotus blooms (43). The parallel between sexual encounter and pollination proves that not only are her emotions erased, but also that women's subordination and biological reproduction are "natural" and thus "normal." This oppressive structure very much resembles other fictional feminist dystopias, which "envision feminist nightmares, inasmuch as they depict societies in which women are entirely subordinated to men," according to Anna Gilarek (34). "Women are stronger" is an ironic statement, because Rien realizes that she is dominated by the man physically, thus causing pain, and psychologically, thus the humiliation. The sense of accomplishment may derive from her belief that she has successfully fulfilled her role as a receiver womb, and that her body is

finally mature enough to contribute to the survival of humans. Either way, it is clear that the authority of dystopia has extended its power into the household and heavily influenced its subjects' thinking and behavior.

The norm of ceaseless pregnancies not only justifies rape and causes women physical pain but also reinforces the gendered division in space and labor. The boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere remains rigid in this story. Women as child-bearers are forced to stay in their domestic realm and carry out their expected duties because pregnancy could lead to additional labor “connected to the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force, such as cooking, cleaning, childcare,” as Tattwamasi Paltasingh and Lakshmi Lingam argue (50). Elisabetta Minico also highlights the spatial politics in feminist dystopias, writing, “to exaggerate the differences between men and women, feminist dystopias often insist on the creation of cities explicitly designed for men, with women coercively relegated to domestic areas” (5).

In “Garden of the Green,” men are “weak” (*yowai*) and “scarce” (*kichō*) according to the Mothers (58). Hence, they must be mobile and cross borders in order to have as much sex as possible. Women, on the other hand, are tied to the house and chores. As the gendered stereotypes of men being physically and mentally “stronger” than women are reversed in the diegetic society, women in this story are considered “stronger” and thus must shoulder more burdens. Rien’s mother cooks and cares for male travelers so that they can stay longer and spend more nights with the girls (47). She is the “perfect” mother that society expects her to be because she educates her daughter to obey, and actively cooperates with the Mothers and follows their procreative ideology. Here, spatial and gender politics are interwoven and continue to enhance the ideology that reduces everyone to children-making machines.

Considering how sex is rid of marriage and familial bonds and has become a mechanical act to conform and perpetuate bodily silence, it is significant that Rien utilizes the image of plants to indicate her feelings towards men and sex. As mentioned earlier, her name is derived from the Japanese word for lotus (*ren*). She first sees the lotus bloom when her breasts start to grow bigger, and her nipples hurt rubbing against her shirt (41). The step towards reproductive maturity of both the lotus and her body suggest a metaphorical parallel.

In contrast, although she considers herself a plant ready for pollination, Rien smells her first man and thinks of the green. Later, she falls in love with a young man, Kuwan, who patiently answers her questions about the outside world. When Rien makes love to him, she thinks the following: “I wonder if it’s because of the foliage. His face looked densely green. I think I wanted to have his children...for the first time, I raised my voice. We made love (*majiwatta*)” (60). This is the only record of her giving a relatively positive response toward intercourse. The smell of green may suggest a man’s body odor, the smell during sex, or her sexual desire since it becomes denser with Kuwan. Moreover, Kawakami uses *majiwaru*—which literally means “to merge”—to describe their sexual encounter, indicating that Rien is actively and emotionally participating in sex. In a world where she may not explicitly address her feelings, the flowers and greenish smell become a means of interior communication and subversion, that is, to have sex not only to give birth to children but also for love.

Nonetheless, Rien, unable to overthrow the dystopia because she is not a Watcher nor an AI Mother, continues to have sex and give birth. When she asks one of the male travelers to have sex with her, he rejects her and responds somberly, “You’ve had enough children already, haven’t you?” (61). At the beginning of the story, Rien’s mother tells her that the lotus blooms during daybreak in summer, and that it makes a sound when it does so (41). At the end of the

story, Rien asks her friend Howa if she has loved anyone. Howa pauses to think, and whispers “no.” The scene ends with a description of lotus blooming while making the sound of a person sighing (62). The sighing lotus evokes a sense of loneliness and resignation, suggesting that although Rien had sex with a man she adores for love and experienced sexual pleasure, there is no way for women like her to freely love and make choices in this world which greedily exploits their bodies and souls and reinforces their role as domestic caretakers—whether they are a regular girl like Rien, or a future Watcher like the Child in “The Dancing Child.”

“The Dancing Child”: Gendered Singularity in a Homogeneous System

“The Dancing Child” inherits the dystopian worldview of “Garden of the Green” and chronicles the life of a Child who is raised by the Mothers to become a new Watcher in an increasingly homogeneous society. However, the protagonist Child was born rebellious (*hankō-teki*), greatly disturbing the Mothers (63). The Mothers agree that because the Child is different from “introverted” children who will “definitely obey our orders,” they must treat the Child with more caution (64-65). Born in a world where everything is closely supervised by the Watchers and meticulously managed by the Mothers, the Child is deemed disobedient, and thus uncontrollable, potentially capable of disrupting the stable and static social structure.

This world can be interpreted as dystopian from several perspectives. Firstly, pregnancies and births are strictly planned and controlled. The Watcher-to-be children are born in accordance with planned time gaps, and their genes trace back to the same family root (*keitō*) (65). The diction is worth a close look because Kawakami did not choose other terms¹⁶ to denote family lineage. Instead, she picked *keitō*, which can refer to family ancestry but also literally means “system,” thus revealing the nature of familial relationships in *The Great Birds*—systematic,

¹⁶ Such as *kakei* (family lineage), *kettō* (bloodline), or simply *chi* (blood).

planned, and dystopian. Secondly, this society has deep roots in genetic engineering and biological determinism. In other words, the future of each individual is almost exclusively determined by their genetic compositions. As explained in the story, the Child is raised to be a Watcher because her¹⁷ genetic profile makes her “fit for a Watcher,” who will “watch, record, and report the lives of their subjects without intervention” (66). The ideology of reproduction and child-rearing demonstrates the systematic effort to justify biological essentialism in order to (re)produce the dystopia’s allies. Thirdly, children’s source of knowledge is produced and controlled by the Mothers. When the Child turns seventeen, the Mothers give the Child and other children computers as a gift. Although children cannot connect their computers with the outside network or communicate with people outside their community, they can read the memories of “standardized [*hyōjun-tekina*] knowledge about the world” (71). This process tells us how this world (re)produces its history through multiple ways—monopolization of the access to knowledge, standardization of knowledge, indoctrination in teaching, and elimination of other knowledge sources—and its goal of keeping this society plannable and controllable for the dystopian system. Lastly, even though the Mothers are portrayed as being kind and caring—and among them the Big Mother is the most humane and loving of all—they confess that they are “alive, but as systems” (69), demonstrating that motherhood has been designed, systematized, and thus dehumanized in order to achieve its greatest efficiency for childrearing in *The Great Bird*.

However, dehumanization does not only occur in the process of designing Mothers. The Watchers, who are genetically related human beings (such as the Child) and raised by the Mothers, go through health scans twice a year. If they show health issues or signs of aging, they

¹⁷ The Child is referred to as “the Child” (*kodomo*) throughout the story. The Child’s sex is revealed to be female by the end of the story when a man has sex with the Child and refers to the Child as a “woman.”

must pass the torch to the next generation of Watchers (77). It is unclear where the sick/elderly Watchers go, but the female Watchers, much like the Child herself, would most likely start a life of nonstop pregnancies and births. Therefore, although the Child has been rebellious, she continues to be a Watcher because she is healthy. Again, this world maximally capitalizes on its residents' youth, health, and reproductive capacities in order to stay stable and increase its population.

Living in such a dystopian world, the Child enjoys the privilege of temporarily living outside the reproductive system as a Watcher. Rather than observing and watching, the Child admits that she rather enjoys being watched (66). In reversing her role from being the gazer to the gazed, the Child may be self-objectifying, but it is important to note that she is disobeying the Mothers' and the society's expectation that she watch and report on others. The Child also spends her time dancing in the woods, which is criticized by the Mothers for being a "useless" (*nan no yaku mo tatanai*) activity. Because this world relies on everyone faithfully obeying the rules and carrying out their roles, the Child stands out as an "other" who neglects her role and even encourages other children to start dancing with her "for fun" (66), posing a destabilizing red flag that pushes the Mothers to tighten their control.

Nonetheless, the Child cannot escape her duty as a Watcher, and is soon dispatched to watch the community where, in "Garden of the Green," Rien lives. As a bystander, the Child is required not to intervene but only observe and report. It does not take her long to notice the suffering of the women being used as spawning machines and men who look "unique" (*dokutoku*) in an extremely homogeneous world.

The Child begins her life as a Watcher. She has learnt from the Big Mother that because very few boys are born in this area, she needs to pay them extra attention.

Almost all the women here have given birth to multiple children. Mothers who are sent here to care for the children seem to be different from those who stay at their

birthplace. Although they resemble each other in appearance, Mothers here look hollow (*kūkyo*).

Women do not live a long life here. While they give birth to several babies, they age quickly. They put up a small tent in the corner of the garden and start a quiet life with a commune of only the elderly.

The Child becomes more interested in the men than the women. There are very few men out here, but each one of them is unique (*dokutoku*). (79)

What is worth noting is that the Child claims that the Mothers assigned to this area look “hollow” (*kūkyo*), but why? Mothers are AIs, and although they appear to be no different from human mothers, their inner love, feelings, and purposes are designed and digitized. They are not supposed to feel a loss of purpose. The Child might be suggesting that because dehumanization in this area is so egregious, the Mothers become more capable of assisting reproduction at the cost of becoming less humane. In addition to Mothers, women are completely reduced to be spawning machines: they must keep giving birth, and their life span is drastically shortened. Moreover, they are less individually unique compared to men. Uniqueness is a significant concept because in this story, children descend from the same ancestor, and their faces look identical. Their characters are supposed to differ very little so that Mothers can train them to be controllable Watchers. However, we know that the Child is born different¹⁸ and grows to be a unique individual (73), and thus is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Similarly, men in Rien’s community enjoy their uniqueness without being assimilated by the homogeneity that rules the world. It is a “privilege” to possess singularity because similarity contributes to homogeneity, which helps build a stable and manageable world. Hence, the Child is someone unique who can live outside the reproductive system. Similarly, men as individuals can travel across community borders.

¹⁸ Kawakami did not make it clear why the Child is born different.

The Child continues to watch. Although Watchers can interact with people in their community, they are banned from “intervening” (*kanshō*) with women’s lives (79). Once again, the dystopia cuts off sources that could potentially become allies and save women’s lives. The Child thinks to herself that “I alone can’t possibly impact the lives here,” indicating that even a Watcher like her can fail to see the injustice of the gendered oppression (79). Still, the Child reaches out to Rien, dancing in front of her and pleasing her. After Rien’s death, the Child visits her bones every day. One day, she runs into Rien’s son and has sex with him.

The man visited one night. He was the man who had come to see Rien’s bones. He looked down at the Child.

“The person I love passed away,” he said, and the Child nodded.

“Do you want to have sex?” the man asked. The Child wavered at first but then agreed. His request for sex was polite and kind. The Child felt happier.

(Is sex an intervention?) The Child wondered this for one second but decided that it would not matter. The sensation of something that had been burning in her body since she was young once again boiled up, and she thought about her life so far. But the Child did not know that she could have become someone other than a Watcher. She remembered the bursting curiosity she had for the world a long time ago.

“I don’t know any other way to console a woman,” the man said when they were finished. The Child laughed. That was a good way to comfort me. Thank you. (82)

It is notable that the purpose of this sexual encounter is *not* for reproduction. Instead, it is perhaps because the man wanted to solace his and the Child’s grief through physical contact. The Child, on the other hand, gains sexual pleasure, which could be symbolized by “something burning in her body” (82), and is reminded of her past curiosity, the desire to break the taboo of refusing to be a Watcher and instead travel and explore the world. Her sex is also first mentioned by the man, whose words suggest that heteronormativity has so deeply infiltrated his mind that heterosexual intercourse becomes the only known way to communicate and bond. Later, the Child finds herself pregnant and her son is taken away by the Mothers immediately after birth. She stays and continues to give birth. The Mothers debate whether to use her genes for next-generation Watchers, but because there was no child like her, her genetic system (*keitō*)

perpetuates without being abolished, and it is unclear how her descendants will influence the world (83). Although sex for her is not meant for reproduction, it results in childbirth, which incorporates the Child into the procreative system from which she used to distance herself and transforms her from a carefree observer into a child-bearer for life. Additionally, because her rebelliousness does not reappear in her offspring, her genes are used to reproduce future Watchers who will keep working for the system obediently. Sex seems to be less an act of resistance that vows to subvert the heterosexual reproductive structure and more of a futile act for private bonding. It is not until the next story, “Change,” that we will see sex with non-human taboo partners as a subversive act against pronatalism.

“Change”: Programmed Motherhood and Rebellious Girls

“Change” takes place after “The Dancing Child,” portraying a world where forced pregnancy between humans is no longer effectively sustainable. Clones are under the Mothers’ supervision and due to genetic mutation, children start to possess superpowers. The story that precedes “Change” is titled “Love” (“Ai”) and is narrated by a clone boy named Noah. Noah is a mind-reader, and so is Kaira, a girl he meets at the center where children grow up. Quickly descending into a playful yet intense competition of reading each other’s minds with Kaira, Noah eventually succeeds in scanning Kaira’s heart and finding out that she unconditionally loves him, her children, the Mothers, and this world. He convinces himself that Kaira is kindhearted, benevolent, and loving, and she is just like him, a human being.

However, this is not the full story. “Change,” which comes after “Love,” is told by Kaira and presents a completely different picture. Kaira, unlike the all-loving and innocent figure in Noah’s perception, is naughty, frolicsome, and rebellious. She is neglected and bullied by her family and friends due to her “dangerous power” of mind-reading and her “instability” that may

lead to change, threatening the peace of her village (289). She is the first one, not only in her story but also in *The Great Bird*, to question the Mothers' origin and notice that they are nonhuman systems lacking the ability to truly love. Like the Child, Kaira is a rebellious force questioning and destabilizing the homogeneous foundation of her society. She learns that reproduction is of great importance from the Mothers but also disobediently responds, "I know that utilizing my capabilities to have children won't necessarily lead to good things" (302). She engages in orgies with human-like creatures who have multiple eyes and noses for fun and pleasure while admitting that Noah, innocent and loyal as he is, is "a mirror, the direct opposite" of her personality (305). In the end, the Mothers hopefully announce that because of Kaira, "something is on its way...Change will happen" (308).

The relationship between the Mothers and Kaira is worth analyzing because the Mothers serve a crucial role in maintaining the dystopia, which simultaneously manipulates the idea of motherhood to stabilize its grasp on power. In the stories preceding "Change," Mothers appear in groups uniformly as caretakers and teachers. They walk in white silky dresses and act in patterns. Their leader, the most generous and caring of all, the Big Mother (*ōkina haha*), has "soft breasts, a swelling belly, and fragrant lips" (32). It is not until page 69 in the anthology when Mothers confess that "we are different from you because we are systems" (69). The lack of detailed description on personality—or rather, individuality—of mothers encourages readers to assume and picture the image of mothers. Perhaps they resemble women in feminist utopias, where, already unburdened from men and patriarchy, women nurture each other in the most affectionate way. A mother of one is a mother for all. Then we learn that they are systems, designed to look after and love humans. Is love by a human mother equal to love by an AI Mother?

Kaira might argue that it is not. She first notices that the Mothers are “homogeneous” (*kin'itsu*)¹⁹ because she cannot tell any difference between them even after she scans their hearts (290). It seems that Mothers can differentiate senses such as being warm and cold, and yet they do not possess projective emotions such as sadness and hatred. They do know one thing: love. Their love is “like a full moon that does not wane, shining bright in their hearts” (293). By comparing their love to moonlight, a force of nature that stands beyond human influence, Kawakami indicates that the Mothers’ love is as compelling and “natural” as nature itself, and adds another layer of hopelessness for humans like Kaira for it is beyond their powers to escape or change this love.

The Mothers’ love is programmed and thus knows no condition nor boundaries. Their goodness can sometimes be repressive and in favor of the patriarchal dystopia instead of the individual they are obliged to love. They are indeed complicit in the sense that they choose the smooth running of the system over the individuals. In “Garden of the Green,” we witnessed how the Mothers abducted Rien’s son the minute he was born, utterly indifferent to Rien’s wailing and defiance (60). It is evident that their love serves not to authentically care for humans/clones but to operate as a commitment to and repressive mechanism for protecting the established order.

Having doubts about the Mothers’ true character, Kaira asks them how they reproduce. “We replicate ourselves,” answer the Mothers (302). Although currently impossible for us real humans, this way of reproduction could create new possibilities for mankind. It is perhaps reasonable to imagine a future where women no longer need a man or sperm to become pregnant, possibly meaning more self-control in fertility and the resulting domestic work. Nevertheless, in “Change,” despite the fact that humans already multiply by depending on

¹⁹ Both the Child and Kaira are emphasized to be different, contrasting the homogeneous Mothers, who act and think in the exact same way.

cloning technologies, girls like Kaira are still being prompted by the Mothers to “make the best use of [their] reproductive capacities” (301) whereas the Mothers, as systems, are the only ones executing this new way of survival. In other words, cloning is controlled by the Watchers, while the Mothers have the “privilege” to self-replicate, proving that reproductive hierarchy and inequality still exist.

Kaira does not desire self-replication per se. Rather, she is drawn to the image of multiplying and how people can potentially bond. She decides, “Children can wait. Before that, I want a family” (302). Kaira expands her sexual journey and describes her sexual experiences in her monologues.

I began to have sex with many boys...Real-life sex is very interesting. During sex, the human heart becomes clear and uncomplicated. The moment boys ejaculate feels fresh to me...If things go well, my senses can tune in with the boys for an instant. I have always wanted their hearts in that moment. (301)

The purpose of sex is of great importance because sex is *not* for reproduction. Unlike the girls in “Garden of the Greens,” Kaira actively chooses her sexual partners and explores her desires. While procreative structures may seem loose and vulnerable during sex, Kaira utilizes her mind-reading abilities and further breaks the boundary into men’s interiority—their hearts—thus reversing the power dynamics in sex and masculinist dystopia in “Garden of the Green” and “The Dancing Child,” where men have the power to transgress the line between the public and the domestic, and the outside and inside of women’s bodies.

Moreover, Kaira initiates and participates in multiple orgies with creatures that look different out of curiosity and for pleasure. The creatures involved, Second of Six (*roku no ni*) and Thirtieth of One (*ichi no sanjū*) are human-like beings with three eyes and no nose due to genetic mutations. They multiply via intercourse, and their numbers signify the household where they were born. In a story prior to “Change,” they are discovered by a traveler appointed by the

Watchers hoping to find “new human groups” existing outside the Watchers’ system. The traveler observes the group for days, counting them as *ippiki* (used to refer to animals rather than humans) and feeling discomfort and disgust because “they resemble humans too much...but they can’t be human” (175). He wonders if the urge to reject them is instinctive, and throws up when he analyzes their DNA, which bears a 99.8% resemblance to human DNA (177).²⁰ Unable to handle his fear, he poisons their pond (178). When Kaira first meets them, she quickly notes that “they don’t look like humans” (272) but then familiarizes herself with them. Struck by constant waves of boredom and the desire to leave the center, she invites Second of Six and Thirtieth of One to engage in sexual activities.

Sex with Noah felt like playing with dry clay. A sense of fruitless effort. I decided to only have sex with the Second of Six. Although his face seemed different, he had a broad heart...Sometimes the Thirtieth of One also joined us. The way they expressed pleasure was soft and smooth; it felt very good. (304)

Kaira’s orgy with the creatures offers a perspective on border-crossing in sex. She not only initiates sex but also welcomes sex with human-like creatures, whose appearance and behavior have thrown those who have seen them into the uncanny valley. Additionally, here, sex seems not to be related to domination but rather exploration and communication, which could deem the act itself subversive compared to other sexual acts in *The Great Bird*. Unlike Rien, Kaira is not raped or hurt; instead, she curiously *acts* by herself for pleasure, and searches for comfort temporarily outside the reproductive cycle, as “children can wait” (302).

Still, Kaira gives birth to two children. The Mothers tell her that most members of the center are “clones being copied repetitively for thousands of years,” Kaira asks, “does that mean birth by intercourse—like what I and Second of Six did—is rare?” The Mothers agree, and Kaira

²⁰ We later know from stories such as “Fate” that creatures such as Second of Six are descended from humans with AIs as parasites in their bodies.

says, “But whoever had sex with me, they never rejected me” (307). “That’s because you are special. You are the most humane human.” With riddle-like prophecies, the Mothers predict, “Change is on its way. Soon” (308). Kaira’s story shows that the bricks in the patriarchal wall of the procreative dystopia are loosening. Through sex with taboo partners not for the purpose of reproduction but for pleasure, Kaira engages in resistance that could potentially subvert the sexual order. By making a girl of flexible sexualities and complex agencies the most humane figure and a catalyst for change, Kawakami is offering some hope for a less oppressive future, a future that is eventually painted in the last chronological story, “Memento.”

“Memento”: Children Made in Factories

How can women be finally free from the burden as well as responsibilities of pregnancy and childbirth? Will women be emancipated from, in Beauvoir’s words, “the generative function” of reproduction (168) if they stop having sex and giving birth? Precisely because the gendered division in reproduction is likely to cause women more physical pain and psychological suffering (such as family separation in Rien’s case) and further confinement and repression, many feminist utopias achieve their goal of building an egalitarian society by eliminating men or maintaining sex segregation (Kendal 59).

Strictly speaking, “Memento” is not a conventional feminist utopia, for men live with women and they regard children as the future of humankind. Men still work in factories and women still take care of children, and the gendered division of labor is still present. The most important point is that they do not bear children. Or rather, they cannot. Human stem cells have lost their ability for mass reproduction, and children are made from cells from random animals such as cows and whales in factories (Kawakami 17). It is true that this is not a result of women’s resistance, but its significance still stands. In this world, women are not raped, hurt, or

forced into pregnancy; they do not have to suffer separation from their children or the pressure to bear as many children as possible.

Nonetheless, the notion that childlessness leads to an unstable, hopeless future stays. “Garden of the Green,” “The Dancing Child,” and “Change” primarily concentrate on the women who bear children, and although the first-person narrator of “Memento” is a wife,²¹ the story mainly focuses on the children the wives take care of. Children are now elevated to be the key that can ensure humanity’s future and hope. When the narrator says, “Aren’t children just troublemakers,” another female caretaker reprimands her, saying, “If children are gone, this world will end. It is because we produce children, raise them, and maintain the diversity of their genetic information that the world can go on” (19). The apocalyptic vision of a childless no-future is manipulated to become a source of fear and anxiety and a convenient excuse for the system to intervene, plan, abject opposition forces, and control women’s bodies and minds. Lee Edelman coins the term “reproductive futurism” to describe the tenacity of heteronormativity in the name of producing and preserving a stable future with the symbolic child at the center and writes that it

impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse...preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations... it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. (2-3)

To achieve this future, society must remain heteronormative, and women must faithfully fulfill their roles in reproduction and mechanically go through pregnancy and childbirth. In

²¹ We do not know if these wives, who take care of the children, are AI Mothers or not. It is mentioned that Mothers have exploded and left the future in humans’ hands by this point, but wives in “Memento” wear “white, silky dresses” which are typical outfits for AI Mothers throughout *The Great Bird*. However, AI Mothers are known for self-replication and not marrying the opposite sex.

“Memento,” although humans now participate in a new form of (re)production, the gendered division in labor as well as the heteronormative marriage system still perpetuate. As the human life span has shortened greatly and people die young very often, they usually marry three or four times. Since the concept of biological mothers prevails no more, wives carry responsibilities for every child and their wellbeing. Collectivism can be detected, for now individual bonds in family and the human as an independent being with a solid identity no longer exist; the narrator wife continues to love every child equally. She may not remember every child she helped care for, but the affection she and the child show to each other when they reunite years later is touching and hopeful. Upon their reunion, the child, Taku, asks her when he became her child and tells her that he is getting married,

“When did I become your child?”

“I can’t tell you. Besides, you came to visit me, didn’t you?”

I looked around but no one was here. I didn’t see Yukiko²² either. I put my arms around Taku’s body and hugged him. He is the child I raised. I felt his hard and warm muscles under my arms.

“Congratulations.”

When I whispered that, Taku smiled cheerfully and lowered his head. It is so good to see you, he said, and hugged me back. Reluctant to part, he turned back to look again and again on his way home. (15)

The touching words and bodily interactions show a mother-child bond similar to what we know in families. In addition, the wives, although taking care of children, rarely show pressure or unhappiness like Rien and Kaira do. The narrator constantly expresses her love for her current husband and asks him to show her the mementos of his deceased wives. With sorrow, they examine the mementos—a piece of bone from each of the dead—and talk about life and death.

Nonetheless, the dystopian aspect cannot be overlooked. Although the mother-child bond is portrayed in a soft and touching manner, the uniqueness of that bond is forever lost as the

²² Yukiko is a female side character who takes care of the children with the narrator.

narrator does not remember her child's name. Her child, comparatively, cannot remember when he became the narrator's family. The singularity of social interaction and relationships is now completely consumed by the homogeneous machine. In addition, despite the fact that women have ceased to suffer from continuous births, they are still confined to their domestic roles, whereas children are entirely dehumanized to be factory products. The reason why the editor Kishimoto calls this story a blend of utopia and dystopia is perhaps because it depicts both hope and despair. It offers hope because although death is inevitable, the living still find ways to remember the dead. Although the children no longer share biological connections and the fear of apocalyptic extinction always lingers, humans still love those they care for. This world indeed shows a new possibility in distinction from the usual dystopian stereotypes—a war-ridden society with fear and horror—and offers a vision towards a slow, peaceful, and more flexible future. However, if we put "Memento" in the context of contemporary Japan, we find that the story offers a warning on the pursuit of utopian efficiencies and stability because the cost of losing our uniqueness and individuality—something that makes us human—is simply impossible to bear.

Conclusion: The Evolving Dystopia

The four stories selected for analysis from *The Great Bird* record the evolution of a dystopia. By depicting the tribulations Rien and the Child go through in an unwanted future, Kawakami exposes the absurdity of sexism that asks women to singlehandedly solve the *shōshika* crisis. Meanwhile, women's reproductive tasks confine themselves to the domestic sphere, where women such as Rien continue to perform gendered duties such as cooking and caretaking. Although they have moments of resistance such as having sex in order to bond with men, both women are incorporated into the dominant system eventually. Kawakami

demonstrates the destructiveness of reproductive dystopias that render such sexual resistance futile by describing women's tribulations of non-stop births and family separations and thus revealing the ugly reality behind the myth of forcing women to be spawning machines in order to boost the fertility rate.

Meanwhile, the whole population continues to drop, and when humans turn to technology for help, Kaira's story tells us that technology alone cannot save humanity from extinction and presents a bleak society where motherhood is designed to manage and control reproduction. Kaira's character and sexual encounters bring ruptures to the order and stability of the reproduction plan, but she alone is not able to overthrow it or free everyone from its pressure, and the utopian urge to further maintain the birthrates continues to thrive and reinforce the pronatalist dystopia. Although total reproductive efficiency is achieved in "Memento," the society cannot be called an eutopia because it continues to be heteronormative in terms of the marriage institution even though humans no longer need heterosexual intercourse to produce children. They have also lost their humanity by artificially reproducing children and animals and eradicating individuality in order to build a collective and sustainable future for their children. Kawakami extrapolates the current social tendency towards stability and efficiency into fiction, portrays a world where humans pay the price of their individual choice in sex and bonding in order to protect their presence on earth, and sends the warning that such utopian and reproductive futurist desires could cause a homogeneous, heteronormative, and dehumanizing reality.

Chapter Two: When Everyone Becomes a Mother: Dismantling the Sexual Order and Returning to the Pronatalist Eden in Murata Sayaka's *Dwindling World* (2015)

In her fictional writings, Murata Sayaka often imagines a world where gender and sexuality function in wildly different ways. To her characters, “sex” means not only heterosexual intercourse but also non-reproductive sexualities such as masturbation, same-sex activities, and fetishism. In 2015, Murata offered a radical take on the functions of sex in a dystopian world in her novel *Dwindling World* (*Shōmetsu sekai*), in which heterosexual intercourse is being gradually replaced by artificial uteri and insemination. The heroine and first-person narrator, Amane, lives in a society where sexual desire is now commonly “dealt with” (*shori*) via masturbation using anime characters for inspiration, and the sexual act between husband and wife is considered incest and pushed out of the heteronormative family system. Amane explores her sexuality with multiple characters and her male neighbor while treating her husband like a brother, which is considered normal in her society. She and her husband then decide to move to Chiba, which is now called “Eden” (*Eden*) under a government-led project that seeks to establish a new family system. In Eden, everything revolves around reproductive tasks. Regardless of their biological sex, child-bearers will be selected by lottery and all pregnancies and miscarriages are monitored by computers. Shocked and upset by the repressive collectivism of Eden, Amane eventually deviates from her supposed role as a child-bearer and caretaker. She has penetrative sex with one of the children of Eden, breaking the most unbreakable taboo.

There are two societies present in this novel: the one where Amane initially lives; and Eden, the city to which she moves. Both seem to be dystopian due to their strict management of sex, love, and family. Despite the fact that the common imagination of Eden, as described by John Collins, denotes “the closest biblical approximation to the idea of Utopia in its strict sense,

on topos, or ‘no place’” (51) and has come to signify harmonious heterosexual reproductivity, Eden in *Dwindling World* operates under an autocratic system with the ultimate goal of boosting childbirth. It shares dystopian features with Amane’s original society, such as the clear and solid boundaries policed between the clean and the filthy regarding sexual activities. Women, especially compared to men in Amane’s original society, are under more pressure due to rape threats, difficulty in taking parental leave, and labor disparities in marriage, and thus are doubly subject to both patriarchal and dystopian oppressions. Nonetheless, there are eutopian sides—the aspects that can possibly make this world a better place—that cannot be neglected. In Amane’s original society, birth control has become a common and accessible tool for women to finally gain more control over their sexual activities and fertility. They can also have non-reproductive sex with non-human objects such as anime characters. In Eden, on the other hand, men are implanted with artificial uteri and can become “mothers” (*okā-san*). All adults, regardless of their biological sex, are expected to perform domestic duties and care for the children (*kodomochan*). Thus, to a large extent, women in Eden are liberated from the unbalanced division of labor in pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing that has been contributing to gender inequity. By portraying such societies and tracing Amane’s pursuit of “correct sex” (*tadashii sei*) (18), Murata Sayaka strips the world of familiar systems such as heterosexual marriage, family, reproduction, and gender expectations. Through the process of defamiliarization, she reconstructs and steers the society towards a eutopian dream of Eden and interrogates readers: can we build a better world by adopting new ways to have sex, bond, and love?

A Eutopic Dystopia: No More Sex, New Ways to Bond

In *Dwindling World*, Amane lives in a Japan that has taken a different track since “the war” (45).²³ Heterosexual intercourse is now stigmatized as “copulation” (*kōbi*, a term referring to sexual behaviors among animals) and thus a person who has conducted intercourse is seen as animalistic and inhuman, and fewer are having intercourse with their lovers. Amane’s art teacher once reminds her of how Japan has arrived in its current state:

Didn’t you learn it in class? Before the war, copulation (*kōbi*) used to be common. But because many adult men were drafted, we wanted many more children in order to send them to the battlefield. That’s why research on artificial insemination started to progress rapidly. We humans no longer need to copulate like animals. We have evolved. (45)

The fact that this particular version of history is taught in school indicates that procreative ideology has already permeated education systems and shaped people’s minds. Indoctrination is common in dystopian societies since learning accurate history and subjects outside the dominant ideology is likely to destabilize the status quo and engender doubt and distrust. According to Edgerly Firchow, history can potentially remind people that society in the past had been organized based on different beliefs and ideologies. Learning this, people might begin to think that “their societies could also be subject to alteration, possibly through their own agency” (69). Therefore, Amane’s society instills its procreative ideology in schools by teaching a uniform and sanitized version of history so that it can stabilize its grasp on power.

The original motivation of developing artificial insemination is explicitly dystopian: children, as power assets instead of human beings, were “made” to fight for the nation and die. Moreover, to call intercourse “animalistic” is to exclude it from humanity and draw a firm line

²³ It is unclear which war Murata is referring to.

between the animalistic/barbaric and the humane/civilized. To most people, intercourse is not only animalistic but also “filthy” (*kitanai*) and unhygienic (*fu-eisei*) (50-51), a concept that repeatedly appears throughout the novel. In a society where everyone pursues clean and pure ways to live and love, it becomes a moral crime to engage in “filthy”²⁴ sexual activities. Because Amane’s parents fell in love, got married, had sexual intercourse, and gave birth to her rather than having her via artificial insemination, she has been discriminated against since she was young. Therefore, intercourse not only affects an individual’s but also their offspring’s social reputation. By pushing intercourse out of normalcy, this society builds a dystopia that meticulously manages individual sex lives—something that used to be private and personal.

The institution that stands in the center of this dystopia is the heteronormative family system, described as “the most important thing in life” by Amane’s friends, whereas intercourse is merely seen as “entertainment of the lower half of the body” (95-96). In an internal monologue, Amane reflects that “we who suffered from the religion of love now are saved by the religion of family. If even our bodies are brainwashed, perhaps we can finally forget how to love” (96). Romantic love is thus treated as lust, a nuisance for families since husbands and wives are expected to behave as siblings. Murata has cautiously selected her wording: “religion” (*shūkyō*) and “brainwash” (*sennō*) certainly carry a cultish and authoritarian resonance, contributing to building the image of an exclusive, all-powerful, and dystopian family institution.

²⁴ See Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of The Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge, 1966) for more information on sex and its stigma. Douglas discusses several types of sexual pollution and notes that social rules control individuals who violate the lines (by committing incest, for example) set by sexual institutions. The ideology of cleanliness/purity separates those who follow such rules from those who oppose them and strives to manage and eliminate aberration—the filthy and polluted—in order to regain stability.

In addition to intercourse and family composition, this dystopia also regulates gender norms. In a survey of sex and reproduction in utopian and dystopian literature, Lyman Tower Sargent and Lucy Sargisson stress that sex in u/dystopian imaginations is closely tied to gender and control (305). In *Dwindling World*, this connection manifests itself in gender codes, especially those oppressive to women. In Amane's original society, women are under immense reproductive pressure: Amane's friends constantly try to persuade her to have children, saying "my kids will look after me when I retire," "pursuing a career is not worth it," and "you'll understand when you have children" (88). At her workplace, Amane watches a female worker leave early because her child is sick and wants her at their bedside (83). Her colleagues agree that having a young child while working will make it difficult to receive childcare leave, and Amane mentions that although her husband can take a childcare leave (after her maternity leave), she is the only one who is qualified for a maternity leave (84).²⁵ The unbalanced gender division in labor and childcare and uneven distribution of welfare become obvious as women in the work force still struggle to meet expectations from both the family and their jobs. Another aspect of women's oppression comes from the home. Although couples now act as siblings, there are cases where husbands make sexual advances towards their wives, which is deemed incestuous by the diegetic society. Amane's ex-husband once groped her breasts and bottom. She wanted to scream, but his kiss plugged her mouth and silenced her voice. Amane vomited repeatedly and called the police later (56). The presence of domestic violence and rape threats against women is alarming. It proves that in addition to the dystopian perspective, women in the original society of

²⁵ There is no mention of a "paternity leave," and Murata may be commenting on the social norm that expects women to go through birth alone in the expense of leaving their job (and possibly losing it), whereas men cannot take a leave to be with their partners for childbirth. Therefore, the reproductive task pressures women the most, and the gap in expectations between mothers and fathers becomes obvious.

Dwindling World continue to suffer from procreative pressure, unjust labor and welfare distribution, violence executed by men, and patriarchy to a large extent.

However, this is not to say that Amane's original society presents a completely hellish picture. It possesses certain eutopian perspectives that are potentially emancipating, making itself a better place. Adopting the term "eutopia," I intend to discuss the efforts of Amane's original society to better itself without being limited by the implications of a rigid, impossibly perfect society suggested by the term "utopia." As shown previously, Amane's original society can hardly be interpreted as a perfect one, but it is also not a fantasy land. Many issues such as gender inequity and reproductive pressure resonate with those present in our societies and therefore, I examine its potentially bettering aspects—the eutopian ones.

In Amane's original society, the use of birth control has become normalized. After their menarche, girls will be brought to a gynecologist by their parents to have a contraceptive device implanted; as for boys, their parents will take them to get a vasectomy. The surgery is said to be quick and free of pain. The gospel for all women, perhaps, is that thanks to the device, menstruation and its pain are being eliminated (137). It is debatable whether teenagers receive these surgeries based on their will since their parents, as their guardians and authorities, sign them up for infertility. Additionally, not all surgeries are covered by insurance and thus are not universally affordable (84). Nonetheless, Amane and her female co-workers have gained relatively more control over their reproductivity, which is too often regulated by patriarchal authorities such as husbands, brothers, and male bosses in gendered dystopias, and over their menstruation and pain, which are often seen as a "natural," "endurable" and thus an "inseparable" part of womanhood.

Although contraceptive devices and artificial insemination have become common, women still shoulder the burden of pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing. Regarding such disparity in labor, Amane's friends have developed a nuanced view on the gender code by agreeing that men should participate in reproduction not as semen-providers but as literal child-bearers, asking "why can't men give birth to children?" They also consider marrying their female friends as a road to happiness and relief, claiming, "I'd like to marry my friend if the law permitted" and "Exactly! If same-sex marriage were allowed, I'd marry my close friend" (84-86). In both conversations, Amane listens to her colleagues without sharing her thoughts with the readers. It could be argued that these women consider male child-bearers and same-sex marriage a shortcut to bypass the pressure and disadvantages of living as a woman in heteronormative patriarchy and are facetiously imagining a better future. Murata is pressing her readers to contemplate the various factors in favor of and against the heteronormative family and reproductive systems, as well as foreshadowing the advent of Eden by asking: what if familial heteronormativity and reproduction based on one's biological sex are dismantled? Will it create a eutopian society for women in particular?

In her original society, another significantly eutopian facet resides in Amane's sexual adventures outside her family. Although people are heavily managed and monitored by social and governmental rules and discouraged from having intercourse with others, they can fall in love with anime characters and engage in virtual intercourse. Terms such as masturbation and fetishism are not used, and instead the "management" (*shori*) of sexual desire is used numerous times. The anime characters occupy a similar status as a human lover does, for they are treated with social seriousness. This form of sexuality can be analyzed as non-normative in a sense,

since it critically deviates from the procreative, monogamous, and family-oriented heteronormative system.

This is not the first time Murata Sayaka imagines non-heteronormative sexualities that challenge the dominant ideology in her fiction. Sex with things other-than-humans such as a curtain, a stuffed toy, and even the Earth has been portrayed in her works, as well as asexuality, sex with multiple partners, heterosexual acts stripped of pleasure, and sex using non-sexual organs. Kuroiwa Yūichi has called Murata's depictions of sexuality "anti genitalia-centric" (*datsu-seikichūshinshugi*) (172). Such non-conforming sexualities subvert heterosexual normativity, which centers on a man inserting his penis into a woman's vagina for reproductive reasons. In *Dwindling World*, Amane always wishes to understand how her parents loved and had sex, and thus other than anime characters, she explores her sexuality with her male neighbor and attempts to use their genitalia for intercourse. While this may seem genitalia-centric and thus heteronormative, it is crucial to reiterate the diegetic social norms regarding intercourse. First of all, because both Amane and her neighbor have contraceptive devices in their bodies, intercourse does not lead to reproduction, and it is filled with discomfort and confusion because they are both reluctant and uncertain, not knowing how to have intercourse properly. Secondly, as someone who values social acceptance, Amane breaks the taboo by having "filthy" intercourse with another man instead of anime characters. Indeed, she is using her vagina and his penis; however, the dystopian society already stigmatizes intercourse with other human as well as the engagement of genitalia. Therefore, what would seem like "normal" heterosexual intercourse is to her something subversive.

If sex and its discourse have become problematized in Amane's original society, can we completely deconstruct the establishment and build a brand-new world? Murata guides us

towards the city of Eden, where both men and women can bear children and be mothers in the pursuit of answers to such questions.

Towards the Dystopic Eden: Artificial Reproduction, Homogeneity, and Sex with a Child

In 2019, Murata Sayaka wrote that “I often imagine a future in which sex doesn’t exist”²⁶ in an opinion piece called “The Future of Sex Lives in All of Us.” If heterosexual activities cease to exist, so might sexual abuse, reproductive pressure, and gendered gaps in labor. One proposal to move away from the heteronormative limitation that only women can give birth by modern feminists lies in the field of technological intervention. An influential champion of this idea is Shulamith Firestone, who writes that “the reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of either...The tyranny of the biological family would be broken” (10-11). Along those lines, Anna Specchio has praised Murata’s creation of a sexless, liberating space in her fiction, writing that “abolishing love, family, and sex, Murata creates what for her represents a utopian society where women and men have the same possibilities and have reached gender equality” (98).

This also applies to Eden in *Dwindling World*, a direct allusion to the Garden of Eden, arguably one of the oldest imagined utopias. Eden used to be Chiba a decade ago; it was selected by the government as a “city of experiment” (*jikken-toshi*) and underwent major developments since then. It adopts not the family system (*kazoku*) but the Eden system (*Rakuen*) in order to boost “multiplication” (*hanshoku*, a word often referring to animal breeding) of the human

²⁶ “Sex” here refers to heterosexual intercourse in Murata’s opinion piece.

species. Before moving to Eden, Amane and her husband watched an advertisement for Eden on TV:

Once a year on December 24th, citizens selected by computers will receive artificial insemination in unison. The reproductive history of the selected will be considered and managed by computers. We control the population so that it will neither overproduce nor underproduce; it will only produce the exact correct number of children.

Men will implant artificial uteri for insemination. Although we have not yet seen any success cases...we are hoping that next year, a man will give birth to a child.

Children will be living in the Center...When they reach the age of fifteen and become a candidate for insemination, they will leave the Center as adults.

All adults are “mothers” (*okā-san*) of all children. All children (*kodomo-chan*) are loved and cherished...They receive homogeneous and stable love so they grow to be mentally stable and physically strong adults. Biological families are proved to be dysfunctional, unequal, and risky for children...Surely this is the very Eden itself. (130-131)

As shown in the advertisement, the Eden system selects citizens to become “mothers” (*okā-san*) by computer regardless of their sex. Their “children” (*kodomo-chan*) will grow up with “homogeneous and stable love” (*kin'itsu-de anteishita aijō*) and become mentally strong future mothers. The most liberating aspect lies in the fact that men are also expected to give birth to children and shoulder childcare duties. By dismantling the biological line drawn by reproductive capacity and physically including men in pregnancy and labor, Eden offers its female residents a more egalitarian version of the future. Many modern feminists stress the extra burden of pregnancy and childcare for women. Among them is Janie Raymond, who uses the term “ejaculatory fatherhood” to describe the male privilege in conception (as in sperm donors) and the decision of parentage in legal cases (30), writing that compared to mothers who provide “egg, gestation, labor, and birth,” merely “popping sperm into a jar” makes one a father, whose claim is usually seen as “legally equivalent, if not superior” (34). Although in Eden, the process of artificial insemination remains unchanged, meaning that sperm from her husband will be

injected into Amane's body (208-209), men who are implanted with artificial uteri go through greater travail. For instance, Amane's husband, now pregnant, envies her because she was born with a womb. Men's disadvantageous status as child-bearers in Eden further problematizes the relationship between sex, gender, and reproductivity; by equalizing reproductive capacity, Murata offers hope in closing gender gaps and erasing gender inequity (97-98).

Such elimination of sexual and reproductive divisions is not unusual in Murata's fiction. Murata herself used to work at convenience stores and family restaurants, and she discussed the gendered expectation in both places. In family restaurants, she was asked to "wear makeup, stockings, and behave gracefully as someone being gazed upon," whereas in convenience stores, since the uniforms are the same, "femininity" was not emphasized. In convenience stores, it is acceptable to not wear makeup at work, and the "fence" between men and women becomes insignificant. From a young age she believed that she must "act like a woman," and yet in convenience stores, she realized that she could exist not as a man nor a woman but an androgynous employee and felt an enormous "sense of liberation" (Specchio 98-99). Perhaps inspired by her working experience at the convenience store, Murata often creates a "clean" genderless and sexless safe zone in her fiction where norms concerning gender, sexuality, and family no longer prevail. In this space, human partners, objects, and behaviors lose their sexual meaning and thus theoretically, they cannot reinforce systematic oppression. Often, the "sexual" partner in this sexless space is a lifeless object or a person who is seemingly asexual and free from gender expectations. Amane's husband fits this criterion—he has "soft hair," which reminds Amane of a pet bird she used to care for. He does not really have bodily odor; his excretions do not seem to be human-like (*ningenmi ga nai*) and they never provoke unpleasant feelings in her (65). Unlike her ex-husband who attempted to rape her, his bird-like, non-

masculinist, non-aggressive, and non-sexual characteristics make him a perfect partner who poses neither sexual desire nor rape threat and can represent a safe, warm home.

Yet he alone cannot shield their home from societal gender oppression, and because he wishes to bear a baby, he and Amane move to Eden—a planned society that claims to have subverted the entire gender and sexual status quo and reached humanity’s wildest eutopian dreams. The cleanliness of Eden streets stands out first. Amane notices that the streets look like “models” (*mokei*) with white houses and light blue pavements; parks have light blue sand and train stations are decorated with light blue concrete (191). The material and conceptual cleanliness, which represents comfort and relief, pictures a regulated and static hegemony that has eradicated filthiness. Here, without the stigma of intercourse—which is now completely replaced by artificial insemination—no one shall suffer from its moral consequences. Without the line drawn by the ownership from birth of a womb, men can fully participate in reproduction. Amane and her husband are both impregnated via insemination, and yet Amane experiences a miscarriage while her husband eventually gives birth to a child. The fact that a man, not a woman, successfully carries pregnancy through with the help of his artificial uterus evokes some hope of an intercourse-free world with no reproductive boundary.

What has been discussed are the eutopian manifestations of Eden, and yet it would be misleading to claim that Eden is a eutopia. Despite the liberating designs, Eden still preserves multiple oppressive factors that could easily render it a dystopia. Like the AI Mothers in Kawakami Hiromi’s *The Great Bird* discussed in Chapter One, who assist the authorities in maintaining the procreative society, mothers (*okā-san*) of Eden are commanded to love the children (*kodomo-chan*) unconditionally. They must offer the children “love showers” (*aijō shawā*) in order to help them cultivate “homogeneous” (*kin’itsu*) and “stable” (*antei*) mental

conditions (202). Again, Murata utilizes words such as homogeneity and stability that may carry a utopian connotation and yet cannot shed their totalitarian facets. In this way, motherhood is abused to perpetuate procreative ideologies in Eden. As unconditional and homogeneous love becomes as common and accessible as “showers” are, it inevitably erases the uniqueness and personal bonds between mother and child. When love becomes the only dominant ideology, it becomes oppressive for not allowing other choices to exist.

The interaction between the Eden mothers and children also reveals dehumanizing features, as the children are treated as national resources—a partial resolution to the rapidly aging society—instead of as independent human beings with complicated emotions and agencies. During an orientation session, Amane and her husband arrive at a park where the mothers in white uniforms—another sign of cleanliness and unity—are playing with the children. Her husband is pleased to socialize and feed the children cookies which strictly regulate their intake of calories. In contrast, Amane feels uninterested and doubtful, pointing out that the babies are treated like cats in a cat café, where “you love and caress them and you can go home whenever you have lost interest.” Her husband, unable to detect her discomfort and sarcasm, agrees that the park seems to be a “baby café” (199). After further observation, Amane describes the similarity and synchronization among both the mothers and babies with unease, showing that she finds unfamiliarity in supposedly familiar situations. She thinks to herself,

The child in my husband’s arms who has a big nose and the dark-skinned one looking at our landlord move their facial muscles in the exact same way. They narrow their eyes and open their mouths and crack a smile. If I look closely, their sibling employees move their muscles and smile in the same way, too.

Children grow up watching the adults. Their *role model* [*otehon*] employees have the same haircut, same facial expressions, and same way of talking. So of course, the children are imprinted and make the same faces.

I shivered. This looks like a factory that produces homogeneous and conforming humans [*hito* in katakana], doesn't it? (200, emphasis in the original)

What is interesting is that Murata adopts the womb-as-factory analogy, which brings Kawakami's "Memento" to mind. In both worlds, reproduction has become mechanical and industrial. While the groupist synchronization in Eden is uncanny enough to make Amane and her readers uncomfortable, Murata refers to the children as *hito* written in katakana (ヒト); by making the word look alien, Murata indicates that the children are not seen as real humans but rather factory products that can boost birthrates. According to Hashimoto Natsuki, the "substitutability of humans" (*ningen no daitaisei*) is one reappearing theme in Murata's works (47). It is clear that once a human can be substituted by another one, they are dehumanized and become a mere product.

After meeting with the Eden mothers and children, Amane begins to experience more pressure initiated by the collectivist and totalitarian Eden. Following an unfortunate miscarriage, she is calmly told by her doctor that "miscarriages during this time of year happen quite often, so they are all managed by computers." Suffering psychically and psychologically, Amane tells her readers,

The doctor spoke to me as if everything was calculated and predictable. I wanted to scream that I lost my child, not the child of humankind (*jinrui no ko*), but I couldn't even do that. They quickly took care of my body. They seemed to suggest that losing a child didn't matter because others would give birth instead. I was in pure agony.

"Thank you for your hard work. Looking forward to your next insemination."
They told me...Perhaps they have lost the ability to feel this pain. (216-217)

Living in a world where the pain of loss is completely erased, the grieving Amane has once again become alienated because she considers her child a human being instead of a number, a child of her own instead of a child of humankind. After her husband gives birth, Amane waits

at the Center and watches newborn babies. She uses *hiki*²⁷ to count the babies (256), despite the fact that the word is a classifier used exclusively to count small animals. Holding a newborn, she thinks to herself that “this view that connects lives is compulsory righteousness [*kyōsei-tekina tadashisa*] and it forces us to be moved. We can’t disobey this ‘wonderful view’ as we continue to be moved and touched” (257-258). She is clearly aware of how life itself is objectified by the procreative Eden. Yet, she cannot directly denounce the absurdity of the Eden system and contradictorily participates in reproduction. The gap between how the first-person narrator Amane thinks in her monologues—observingly, doubtfully, and critically—and what she actually does in action—seeking social approval and reassurance—is a consistent thread throughout the novel. Her inner voice shows a form of agency and allies with her readers by exposing the dark sides of dystopias, whereas her action demonstrates how oppressive a dystopia can be. Afraid to be the only “other” in a homogeneous society, Amane believes that she can be accepted by conforming to the greater norm. Consequentially, through her conformity, she becomes an obedient subject of the dystopian Eden.

Amane’s ambivalent stance in Eden takes its most extreme form in a confrontation with her mother. Amane’s mother had constantly stressed a set of “righteous” values that is perhaps more familiar to readers—to meet someone, fall in love, marry, have intercourse, and have a child, which conflict with the social norms of artificial insemination and the abolishment of intercourse and causes Amane to have doubts. After her miscarriage, Amane visits her mother, who continues to claim that having intercourse to create children is a part of her unchangeable “instinct” (*honmō*) (261). She then accuses Amane of being easily “influenced” (*kanka*) and

²⁷ *Hiki* is also used in Kawakami’s *The Great Bird* to describe human-like creatures, suggesting that they are not seen as humans.

“brainwashed” (*sennō*) by the two societies she lived/lives in (262). Amane responds, “Mother, aren’t you brainwashed as well? Does an un-brainwashed brain even exist in this world? If anything, why not go mad in the most suitably insane way? It’ll be a relief” (263). Confused by her remarks, Amane’s mother prepares to leave, and yet she suddenly falls on her knees. It turns out that Amane has drugged her mother’s tea. In perfect calmness, Amane begins to question her mother, who is struggling to catch her breath.

Mother, I am scared. No matter where I go, “normalcy” (*seijō*) comes after me although I really wanted to be abnormal...I become the normal me no matter which society I am in...Mother, you are the one who made me become this “normal” human. Because of you, I became a human (*hito* in katakana) like this. Mother, this time, you’ll be normal for me. In this world, together, we go insane in the correct way...Mother (*okā-san*), am I not your child (*kodomo-chan*)? (264-265)

From this conversation, it is obvious that Amane is aware of the destructiveness of normalcy and conformity. She understands that in both her previous residence and Eden, collectivist normalcy reinforces procreative ideologies and “brainwashes” people to become child-bearers. By drugging her mother and perhaps even committing matricide, Amane breaks the taboo in the family-oriented society she used to live in, where family is the dominant social system and members are obliged to love each other. Attempted murder is her most extreme rebellion as she literally and metaphorically cuts the bloodline by harming her mother, whose actions have caused Amane to be discriminated against. Despite the radical resistance, Amane is showing brainwashed complicity to Eden and its system in her language. By referring to herself as a *hito* (human, written in katakana showing its alienated and dehumanized aspect) and then a child (*kodomo-chan*) and her mother as an Eden *okā-san* (おかあさん instead of お母さん, which Amane used to call her mother), Amane proves that she has familiarized herself with Eden’s lexicon and the pro-reproductive ideology it represents, and that she already actively

cooperates with the machine that dehumanizes humans into *hito* and exploits them as disposable objects.

It might be tempting to conclude that in spite of her awareness of Eden's dystopian structure, Amane has been brainwashed into a complicit subject. Nevertheless, at the ending of the novel, Murata takes a further step and offers a shocking scene of rebellion. It is worth close reading because Amane has non-reproductive intercourse with a child (*kodomo-chan*),²⁸ going against every rule in Eden. Needless to say, an adult performing sexual acts of any kind on/with a minor is an action of immorality and crime both to Eden residents and to readers as well. Yet, the plot design provides a new perspective on how we think of family, construct nonconforming sexuality, and seek affection in a place like Eden that revolves solely around reproduction.

Upon her return from her mother's residence, Amane excretes (*haisetsu*, a transitive verb whose object often consists of human metabolic wastes) her sexual desires at the station's "clean room" and runs into a child (*kodomo-chan*), who is fourteen years old, tall, and shy. The child's biological sex is not yet revealed, but their gender performance shows masculine traits, for they act and talk like a teenage boy (266-267).²⁹ During a conversation on Center life, Amane learns that the child does not even understand what loneliness means. It then occurs to her that she is forgetting that feeling, too. "Are you okay, mother (*okā-san*)?" Staring at the child's white arm, she realizes that she cannot tell if the child is a girl or a boy (268). Trying to look at the child's face closely, Amane unintentionally spills coffee on the child, and she brings the child to her

²⁸ Because Eden propagates collectivism arguing a child of one is a child of all, there is no way to tell whether this child is the one to whom Amane's husband gave birth or not.

²⁹ The child is tall in a white smoking jacket and talks like a teenage boy ("Don't treat me like a kid") (267).

room to change. When the child undresses, Amane observes their flat chest, and thinks that they “might be a boy” (269).

In addition to the ambiguity in gender performance, the child’s individuality is also ambiguous. Amane confesses to her readers that she cannot tell the difference between the child in front of her, the child whose schoolwork she helped with yesterday at the park, and the child who helped her with her luggage the day before yesterday (270). “The child, along with many other children, moves their eyelids, lifts their cheeks and lips, and cracks a smile in the exact same way” (271). Without any second thoughts, Amane asks the child,

“Child, do you want to put that into mother’s body?”

I wanted to know how much “he” knows about sex and if “he” would be embarrassed, so I asked him while touching his tiny penis with my forefinger.

“Okay, I understand, because from the start we were all in mother’s body.”

Naked and smiling, the child reminded me of a picture book I read that had Adam of Eden himself in it. (271)

This encounter may seem astounding or even appalling, and it can be understood as an act of crime in Eden, under Japanese law, and many other contemporary legal codes. My analysis here focuses almost exclusively on Amane’s experience and perspective because Amane, as the first-person narrator, controls the narrative voice and thus it is uncertain whether the child understands the idea of consent and the implication of having intercourse in Eden or not. It can be argued that Amane is about to coerce the child into intercourse for her own purpose, and hence in this sense, the child is not only a dehumanized victim of Eden but also of Amane’s implicit duress.

However, this scene does highlight the absence of sex-and-gender-related stereotypes in Eden. Not only is the child’s sex deemed ambiguous by Amane when she refers to the child as “he” in quotation marks, the child’s exchange with Amane evokes no shame nor any negative

implication of filthiness regarding intercourse. The child is compared to Adam of Eden, who lives in a world where the stigma of intercourse does not exist in the first place. This dismantling of sexual systems is at its most obvious and compelling when Amane engages in intercourse with the child:

On the white sheet, I was *making* sex (*sekkusu o tsukutte-ita*) ...Just like pollination, my wet membranes swayed on top of the child's wet membranes...There was no pleasure, only an incomprehensible sense of relief. (272-273)

Although presented with vivid images of the act and bodily responses, readers may have difficulty in finding it sexual. Like Rien's rape in *The Great Bird*, intercourse is compared to pollination, a "natural" process that justifies the act. Without any mention of pleasure, intercourse is described as the overlap of membranes, a dehumanizing way of connection devoid of any affection. Nonetheless, the powerful aspect is that Amane³⁰ *chooses* to involve a child—the pure national resource and future mother (*okā-san*)—in intercourse—the alien way of sex. Above all, the act itself is not for reproduction, which goes against all the rules in Eden, but out of curiosity and the desire to construct her sexuality. Murata's convention of creating a safe space devoid of sexual norms and morality is of great significance, as Iida Yūko writes in a study of Murata's other works:

The girls (Murata's protagonists) possess sexual desires. However, the gendered existing sexual behaviors alienate them. For that reason, the girls attempt to create a space in order to free their bodily desires. Objects that are not sexually symbolized [*sei-tekini kigōka-sareteinai mono*] cannot interrupt the flow of their desires. The relationship with these objects will liberate them. (55)

³⁰ My analysis here focuses almost exclusively on Amane's experience and perspective not only because *Dwindling World* is narrated by her from her point of view, but also because it is hard to imagine that the child understands the idea of consent prior to intercourse and the implication of having intercourse in Eden.

If we follow Iida's observation, we can consider the room as a safe space for Amane and the seemingly sexless child as an object with whom Amane can explore her sex drive. It can be a dangerous assumption because it further objectifies the child, making Amane a criminal induced by Eden. Intercourse also completely reverses the celebrated mother-child relationship in Eden and provokes rape-like resonances. With no intention to undermine the harmful implications of Amane's act, I fully acknowledge that because Amane compels the child to have intercourse with her, she can be interpreted as a power abuser resembling Eden itself. However, I also wish to emphasize the subversion against Eden through the act of intercourse. By having intercourse and comparing it to pollination, Amane rebels against the dominance of artificial insemination and the stigma of intercourse. By having sexual intercourse with a child, Amane disobeys the expectation of a caretaker and goes beyond standards of motherhood, although she willfully ignores the child's lacking knowledge regarding sex. By having non-reproductive sex (for she still has the contraceptive device in her body), Amane resists the totalitarian procreative Eden. By arbitrarily stripping the child of sexuality and yet having intercourse, Amane experiments with and constructs her sexuality in her own zone. The question of agency comes into play, and subtle as it might be, Amane renders it disruptive and unstable against Eden's control. To readers, the discomfort proves the uneasy process of defamiliarization, of the demolition of existing structures. Murata sends a compelling message on the danger of perfection, arguing that even after the abolishment of sex and its problematic inefficiencies such as filthiness and reproductive barriers, Eden morphs into an oppressive dystopia that has failed to achieve its eutopian dreams. Moreover, even if Amane destabilizes Eden's static and collective control on reproduction, she still dehumanizes the child for her exploration and fails to escape Eden's influence.

Will the dystopian Eden be destroyed? Murata welcomes endless speculations with an open ending. During the intercourse, Amane and the child hear a mysterious sound of someone banging on the wall. Amane explains that she has rented the next room and keeps “her pet” there, who feeds on “the world itself” (274). Confusing as it is, the “pet” could be her husband, who possess birdlike features, or her mother, who survived the murder after all, or a metaphor for Amane’s other personality who plays the “normal” and obedient role. The groaning next door evokes nostalgia in Amane because it is the sound of a human/*hito* (in katakana) who used to be an animal, and she gradually cannot distinguish her voice from that sound (275), indicating that she will no longer possess any difference between a human and an animal as she descends into self-dehumanization and the ultimate assimilation into Eden. In the end, despite its eutopian benefits, Eden remains an exclusive and homogeneous machine; it converts its subjects into accomplices, with whom it crushes humanity for its purpose.

Conclusion: Deconstructing the Status Quo

Murata Sayaka once said in an interview that “people older than me read *Dwindling World* and say the place sounds dreadful. People in the same generation say it sounds utopian” (Lewis). Similarly, in a review of the novel, Saitō Tamaki confirms that women see *Dwindling World* as a utopia and men as a dystopia, and credits the novel as a strong resistance against patriarchy and heteronormative sexuality (Murata 276). This gendered and generational gap in reception shows that a complete change of family structure and sexuality can provoke uneasiness in readers and encourage us to distant ourselves from our norms and morality. It also strengthens my stance that utopia and dystopia co-exist in an ever-changing Mobius strip—it depends which side you are on and how you engage with the story.

Many of Murata's fictional writings can be interpreted as a response to the *shōshika* crisis, sometimes seen as a social apocalypse that requires women's full participation in reproduction. A dystopian vision such as Eden, which exploits human's reproductive capacities to their extreme warns against real-life social tendencies, which, if without proper management, could easily bring Eden into reality. For Murata, to present such an exaggerated and undesirable future is also to call for caution regarding the destructiveness of perfection. Eden might have critically de-constructed gender and sexual dichotomic codes³¹ and become a perfect embodiment of efficiency and equity, yet such a utopian dream can only thrive on exclusivity, order, and absolute stability—one step away from totalitarianism. In spite of its eutopian perspectives on reproductive equity, *Dwindling World* serves as a political and social intervention by commenting on the absurdity of treating humans like spawning machines, and complicating the solution to the *shōshika* crisis. Murata problematizes Firestone's idealization of artificial reproduction³² by showing that even if we dissolve all the reproductive boundaries and physically include men in pregnancy and birth, we might still end up building a dystopian Eden for everyone in pursuit of absolute perfection and efficiency.

³¹ Iida praises Murata's approach which "destroys everything from sexuality to gender and reproductive roles" and "attacks gender codes" and renders it "gender queer" (50-51).

³² When it comes to artificial reproduction in contemporary Japanese society, women's rights activists and lawyers express ethical concerns in terms of a child's identity formation and warn against eugenics-based birth control and the potential harm from applying reproductive technologies to women, especially those from third-world countries (Buckley 88-91).

Conclusion: A Woman's Role in Dystopia

I first pondered my role as a woman in society when I read a medical article that explains menstrual cramps. It seems that as part of the ovulation cycle, the inner lining of a uterus grows thicker to prepare for insemination. If the egg is not fertilized, the lining will be shed, causing muscle contractions.³³ I was shocked to learn that my body is, in a way, designed for the purpose of fertilization. Swelling, pain, every minute of discomfort I experience each month—all because my egg was not fertilized. Although there are many ways to ease the cramps, during my period I always feel that I have very little control over my body. I ask myself, what does it mean to have a “female” body? And how do I grapple with its social expectations regarding labor and reproduction?

Society asks similar questions. In order to preserve its cherished order, stability, and sustainability, reproductive futurism takes hold and deems heterosexuality the dominant sexual ideology, excludes queerness, and deprives people, especially women, of their reproductive choice and agencies. The ideas that people are no more than uteri and that a womb bears the future of the nation contribute to sexism and misogyny, confine people to their reproductive and gender roles, and affect the policy-making process that could impact each one of us.

In a 2003 public discussion on declining birthrates, the then Chair of Liberal Democratic Party's Investigation on the *shōshika* crisis Mori Yoshirō commented on the presence of women who do not have children, claiming,

The point of social welfare is to thank and take care of women who gave birth to many children for the nation. Although we cannot call childless women selfish, it is really

³³ See Mayo Clinic's information on menstrual cramps at <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/menstrual-cramps/symptoms-causes/syc-20374938>.

strange to care for them using our taxpayer money while they are singing freedom, enjoying life, and aging. (*Yahoo News*)

Such comments made by powerful male politicians such as Yanagisawa and Mori who work on *shōshika* policies reflect a type of entrenched sexism that controls women's roles, bodies, and sexualities in society. They also prove the domination of reproductive futurism and heteronormativity: the belief that only the steady (re)production of children by heterosexual men and women can ensure a hopeful future for humanity.

My goal in analyzing women writers' reproductive dystopias is to highlight the socio-political messages of these texts—messages that counter such contemporary sexism—and to examine how they respond to *shōshika*, a social phenomenon that sometimes makes specific suggestions regarding women's role as child-bearers and caretakers in Japan. These stories address women's anxieties of living in a patriarchal society that demands more births as *shōshika* worsens and provide a sense of familiarity and relatability. Nonetheless, Kawakami and Murata portray apocalyptic crisis in their fiction and imagine alternative outcomes, evoking unfamiliarity and encouraging readers to recognize and challenge biological essentialism, heteronormativity, and reproductive futurism in current socio-political rhetoric.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, contemporary women writers Kawakami and Murata extend such sexist trends into fictional worlds where, driven by the desire to restore humanity's falling reproductive capacities, characters are turned into child-bearing machines and forced into endless pregnancies and births. Consequentially, their role as child-bearers sets their place in families and reinforces the uneven gender division in labor that many modern feminists recognize and criticize. By tracing the development of Kawakami's interconnected fictional world in *The Great Bird*, I argued that this world achieves its utopian desire of stability and

homogeneity at the cost of individual and humane bonds. AI Mothers, in the hope of preserving humanity, coerce girls into continuous pregnancies and family separations. In this sense, motherhood is also problematized when it becomes a dystopia's tool for supervision and control.

Meanwhile, in *Dwindling World*, Murata presents us with two distinct worlds where the idea of sex and family has changed drastically. In the protagonist Amane's original society, intercourse with human partners is seen as filthy, completely pushed out of the family institution, and is gradually replaced by artificial insemination. Yet women remain the group that shoulders gendered pressure in the workplace and that faces rape threats at home. Amane and her husband then move to Eden, a eutopian dystopia. Although in Eden the gendered and reproductive division in labor is dissolved, residents are under immense reproductive pressure and children are reproduced as factory products. Even Amane is ultimately trained by Eden to become a criminal, and, in the end, she devolves into a state of self-dehumanization.

This is not to say that both worlds are entirely dystopian, because they prove to be eutopian in many ways. Some scholars use the term eutopia to emphasize a society's effort to better itself without being limited to the impracticality and totalitarian implications embedded in utopianism. Kawakami's world in *The Great Bird* can be hardly called entirely eutopian because women are subject to immense reproductive pressure with no other choice. Even in the final story "Memento," where women are free from such pressure, the gendered division of labor is still stagnant. Women continue to work in the domestic sphere as caretakers while men work in factories. In comparison, Murata's Eden presents eutopian aspects compared to contemporary Japan and the society that the protagonist used to live in. Anyone can choose to move to Eden and become a "mother" (*okāsan*) responsible for giving birth and caring for every child. The gendered gap in the labor division of reproductive roles that previously oppressed women is

finally closed. Nonetheless, by eliminating individuality and the possibility of choice, Eden remains a totalitarian dystopia that only serves the greater, collective goal of population control.

In depicting the absurdity and dehumanizing destructiveness of the women-as-wombs analogy, Kawakami and Murata both refer to current social discourse and yet defamiliarize their readers by imagining alternative worlds. As Katharine Snyder points out, one of the most cogent effects dystopian literature can elicit is uncanniness within the realm of realness while reading “cautionary tales of the future” (470). Both writers expose the bleak reality that women are being doubly oppressed by dystopian and patriarchal systems. Female characters indeed initiate resistance, and yet not every rebellious act is transgressive and directly contributes to the dismantling of the system. In the end, even if humanity reaches complete efficiency in reproduction, the totalitarian machine devours individuality and presents an undesirable, dehumanizing future. Thus, these texts critique the existing mentality that reduces women to child-bearing machines, counter the myth of reproductive futurism and heteronormativity as a solution to *shōshika*, and send warnings about the desire for total stability and efficiency.

Posthumanism: Beyond Waters and Stars

Although this thesis has primarily focused on analyzing the warning against utopian desires and dystopian realities in Kawakami’s and Murata’s novels, there are multiple directions and observations that could be productively explored in future research. Firstly, the idea of motherhood takes on a new meaning in these texts. In *The Great Bird*, motherhood is de-anthropocentrized. Although the AI Mothers still embody the feminine features of a loving mother, they do not occupy a body of flesh and blood. Although they stay in their maternal roles, this practice of extending motherhood to other-than-human beings could potentially liberate women from their gendered expectations of being a perfect mother and caretaker as well as

expand our understanding of the mother-child bond and digitized emotions. On the other hand, the Eden reproductive system attaches new agencies to the male bodies by equalizing reproductive responsibilities. Eden does provide men (and potentially the LGBTQ community) opportunities to physically participate in reproduction the way a heteronormative, patriarchal society will not allow, but it wipes away individual agencies by enforcing and monitoring reproduction in a totalitarian manner.

Moreover, through the act of dystopian planning and control, both texts problematize the relationship between mothers and children, which is typically regarded as intimate and loving. David Bleich points out that the act of organizing a society “automatically prohibits a conflict-free situation in the individual unless the social organization is, impossible enough, between mother and infant; and that relationship is not conflict-free either” (125). Bleich’s point is relevant because both stories have a strong focus on motherhood and its social image of love and sacrifice. Yet, AI Mothers abuse their love by forcing girls into pregnancies. Similarly, in *Dwindling World*, Amane rarely enjoys a harmonious relationship with her mother and ends up drugging her. Both works break down the supposedly utopian relationship between mothers and children and offer a chilling, dehumanizing dystopian reality.

Secondly, Eden’s eutopian sides have strict limitations. Making everyone a child-bearer can be a slippery slope especially because Amane’s original society and contemporary Japan remain patriarchal, and patriarchy works in a way that favors powerful men. An essay by prominent feminist Gloria Steinem (1934-) “If Men Could Menstruate” (1978) satirizes the idea that mutual understanding and equity can be achieved if men could menstruate whereas women could not. Steinem imagines an alternative society where menstruating men glorify menstruation as being a “masculine” sign of competency, make sanitary products free, and continue to silence

and exclude women. We cannot deny Steinem's vision because we still live in patriarchal societies. In the case of Eden, although it does not reinforce its gender division, its eutopian implication has its own limits by only presenting a possible, better future, as Eden cannot guarantee to subvert the patriarchy or avoid a dystopian outcome.

Thirdly, children in both texts become sexualized and politicalized figures that demonstrate reproductive futurist characteristics. In *The Great Bird*, children are sexualized in the sense that the purpose of their life is to have sex and reproduce as in "Garden of the Green" and "The Dancing Child." In Eden, by having intercourse, Amane brings the child back to the problematic heterosexual structure that Eden eliminated in the first place. In both texts, childhood is made to adhere to the reproductive system. The innocent period of growing up and exploring the world is mainly replaced by the reproductive burden that a child must learn to bear, whereas the image of children is used to justify and strengthen pronatalism.

Lastly, in Kawakami's and Murata's dystopias, posthuman characters challenge the idea of humanness and disrupt the stability of the society. If I were to expand this thesis project and look at *The Great Bird* and *Dwindling World* from this alternative perspective, the idea of posthumanism must be introduced. Posthumans generally include cyborgs and robots; the term can also refer to non-humans, such as animals and monsters.³⁴ I use the term to refer to a being that has fluid bodily boundaries and challenges the definition of an independent human. Posthumanism is not only interwoven into the fabric of both stories but is also important when discussing u/dystopias because u/dystopias always strive to distinguish the human/us from the non-human/other in order to exclude the latter and achieve perfect order and control.

³⁴ See Patricia MacCormack's *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2012) for posthumanist theories.

Posthumanism, on the other hand, blurs the boundary between the human and other-than-human and de-mystifies the belief that a human is an independent and self-governing being who has fixed and controllable bodily borders. In this sense, the presence of a posthuman could thus potentially destabilize the u/dystopias and provoke resistance.

The posthuman in *The Great Bird* mostly consist of human clones and AI Mothers. In “Garden of the Green,” the Mothers are systems which supervise and interfere with human lives. In “The Dancing Child” and “Change,” they monitor the lives of clones while encouraging clones to have sexual intercourse. In “Memento,” although they have self-destructed, children now are made from animal cells in factories, thus becoming a type of posthuman. The mothers here wear white silky dresses—a signifying dress code for Mothers. Since “Memento” is chronologically the last story but is presented in the anthology as the opening story, readers would not have noticed this detail until they finish the book and return to “Memento.” This detail raises many questions: have the AI Mothers really vanished? Are the mother characters in “Memento” AI or humans?

These answers matter for dystopias, for a dystopia almost always differentiates “us” from the “other” and thus justifies itself when it identifies and expels the ones who are different. In the first two stories discussed above, posthumans watch and self-replicate whereas human women suffer from immense reproductive pressure. The ontological line between what is considered “human” and what is not constitutes a major theme in *The Great Bird*, as Kawakami confronts her readers and asks if we are aware of the destructiveness of exclusion—something that has brought us to extinction through never-ending wars—and if we can learn to listen to and embrace the other-than-human and the posthuman, which may include women seen as wombs, the AI Mothers, the three-eyed creatures, and children made from animal cells in factories.

In comparison, although almost everyone in *Dwindling World* has a contraception device in their body and thus embodies a fusion of flesh and machine—a cyborg posthuman³⁵—Murata’s posthuman depiction is mostly constructed by water images. Amane, her classmate Mizu-uchi, her neighbor lover Mizuhito, her husband Amamiya all have “water” and “rain” images in their names; Eden is painted in a light blue (*mizu-iro*), and Eden mothers’ love resemble a “love shower.” During intercourse with the child, Amane and the child emit all types of water: saliva, tears, mucus, lubrication, and semen, while their “wet membranes” are on top of each other. The idea that we are connected by water cycles is analyzed by Astrida Neimanis in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. Neimanis argues that the water we intake and the water we emit connects us with other bodies, thus challenging individualism, anthropocentrism, and phallogocentrism (4), writing,

For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves. Indeed, bodies of water undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human. (2)

Therefore, we are not individuals with clear and solid bodily boundaries. Instead, we are “pieces of stars” (*hoshi no kakera*), a term repeatedly used by Murata in her other novels such as *Noah’s Ark* (*Hakobune*, 2016). Women who call themselves pieces of stars regard themselves as connected to other beings and objects through bodily fluids as a part of universe. Their sexual connections with beings with or without life is a posthuman interaction; it challenges the

³⁵ In addition to cyborgs, animal metaphors can also be found in *Dwindling World* and Murata’s other fictions. For example, Amane’s husband reminds her of her pet bird in the sense that he does not seem human in many ways. Additionally, in the end where Amane has intercourse with the Eden child, they hear her “pet” making noises next doors. Amane explains that her “pet” feeds on “the world,” and then becomes the “animal” (*dōbutsu*) that perfectly resembles this world (274). If she is referring to her alternative self as the “pet” of hers, this statement is a testimony of how dehumanizing Eden is in the sense that it not only trains everyone to be animals but also teaches them to self-dehumanize.

masculinist myth of an independent human with tightly guarded borders, disrupting the stability and control of dystopia.

It is one of human's fundamental instincts to desire stability, predictability, and continuity, and yet we cannot let this hope for a perfect future go to extremes. Dystopian storytellers such as Murakami Haruki address the frequent theme of individual versus the system, calling the individual an "egg" that "breaks against the hard, high wall" of the system (Flood). If we adopt his metaphor in a patriarchal context like contemporary Japan, we can say that the egg can be a metaphor for pregnancy and birth. While dystopias comment on utopian impulses and teach us how we should see and embrace our future, reproductive dystopias offer a specific take on the role of women, how they are expected to participate in social affairs, and how they respond to the patriarchal and dystopian systems. If the wall represents the dystopian, heteronormative patriarchy and its demand that women put an end to *shōshika* alone, I shall, like Murakami, always stand in solidarity with the egg in pursuit of the choice to control our own bodies, sexualities, and agencies.

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