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„I live to love my friends, live to love the soil, live for the people’: The (anti-)utopia of Kirino Natsuo’s
Poritikon“

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1. Introduction

Kirino Natsuo (born 1951) has become one of the most popular Japanese authors over the last decade. Since her ‘official’ debut in 1993¹ (with *Kao ni furikakaru ame*; “Rain falling on her face”), she has enjoyed continued significance in Japan, having been awarded numerous literary prizes over the years. Kirino’s commercial breakthrough, the highly acclaimed novel *OUT* (1997), has also become the first work from her rather expansive oeuvre to be translated into English (2003), earning the author a relatively broad international exposure. *OUT* has proven to be successful abroad on both commercial and critical terms (being the first Japanese novel to win the prestigious Edgar Allan Poe prize in 2004).

The primary goal of this thesis is to disprove Kirino’s overly simplified and inaccurate perception as a ‘mystery’ author. Although as much is obvious from a cursory glance on her output over the past twenty years (if not from reading her other translated novels, which only bear tangential, if any, relations to crime fiction), this is still the category Kirino Natsuo continues to be shoehorned into, both in and outside of academic circles. Pursuing this goal, Chapter 2 offers a more extensive overview of Kirino’s work, along with a review of the various literary labels she has been assigned over the years (such as *joryū bungaku* or ‘women’s literature’, *shakai-ha* or the literature of social criticism, or new proletarian literature), both in Japan and abroad. In its latter part, this chapter also examines the most prominent themes running throughout Kirino’s body of work, such as recurring character types, approach to narrative or her technique of blending fact and fiction.

In order to prove any simplified classification of Kirino Natsuo’s writing (especially as a genre writer) as inadequate, in this thesis I set out to analyze her employment of the utopian/dystopian genre within *Poritikon* (2011²), as well as to prove that she treats the literary genre(s) unconventionally, something which has become Kirino’s *modus operandi* as a writer. Since the promotional material related to the novel, as well as its own cover(s) heavily feature the keywords ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’, Chapter 3 is dedicated to an attempt to define both these, as well as other related concepts residing in between these two poles. The chapter further examines narrative patterns typical for both utopian and dystopian fiction and the function of utopian and dystopian writings as vehicles for social criticism. The latter part of Chapter 3 offers a brief investigation of literary utopias in Japan and their presence on the Japanese literary scene (3.3.1). Utopia in Japan is examined in order to set up both a contrasting framework to the

¹ As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, Kirino was already a published author by this point. The 1993 novel is, however, often treated as her first (in sources including Kirino’s official website).

² Date of first release in book form.

Western literary tradition, as well as to contextualize Kirino's literary utopia/dystopia and her treatment of the 'genre', or rather the literary tradition, within both frameworks. Due to Kirino's recurring blending of fact and fiction (as described in Chapter 2) and *Poritikon*'s references to both Japanese literature and a real utopian community, Atarashiki mura, the last part of Chapter 3 briefly explores the history of utopian practice in Japan (3.3.2), with focus on the aforementioned community (3.3.3).

The novel *Poritikon*, as of 2014 available only in Japanese, is both Kirino's longest work to date (spanning over 800 pages in its hardcover edition, published in two volumes), as well as a striking departure in style from her previous output. Although – as most of her work – hard to classify within a single genre, the novel deals with a fictional utopian community called Iwan-mura (唯腕村) located in the northern prefecture of Tōhoku. The reader gets acquainted with this community both through the lens of the community's native Takanami Toichi, as well as an outsider, Nakajima Maya. A major reason behind taking up *Poritikon* as one example of Kirino's fictional works in this thesis is its underexposure in academic writing on Kirino Natsuo and the novel's potential to illustrate the thematic breadth of Kirino's oeuvre, a point often neglected in examinations of her work.

Poritikon is examined as both a Kirino novel (in regard to themes typical for her works), as well as a utopian/dystopian novel, in Chapter 4. The central part of this thesis is divided into three parts, the first briefly introducing the author's intentions as gleaned from various interviews, while also illustrating the radical transformations *Poritikon* has undergone since its first concept. The second part analyzes the novel's protagonists, particularly focusing on the question whether, or in what respect they can be viewed as characters typical for Kirino's writing, as described in Chapter 2. Kirino's characters are generally regarded as members of lower social strata, leading untypical lifestyles or otherwise unfitting in a wholesome, middle-class image; making less privileged characters or 'misfits' the focal point of her stories allows her to raise criticism at the Japanese society. Kirino is particularly well-known for her scathing criticism of Japan's gender politics and her female protagonists either exploring the darker sides of life, or refusing to conform to the inferior roles they have implicitly been assigned. The chapter's final part is then dedicated to an analysis of utopian/dystopian patterns in *Poritikon* and Kirino's treatment of these patterns. I will eventually attempt to position the novel within the spectrum of utopian/dystopian literature.

The central point of interest for this thesis is an assessment of *Poritikon* within the context of Kirino's oeuvre as well as the context of utopian/dystopian fiction. By extension, it shall be shown how Kirino comments on Japanese society by means of her fiction. As will be shown in Chapter 2, Kirino

Natsuo's works cannot be extrapolated from the realities of Japanese life, and are more often than not closely bound to actual problems and issues in Japan. Kirino often employs elements of various genres (such as hard-boiled fiction) in order to voice social criticism or point out societal ills, that of gender disparity being only the most obvious one. Following this line of argument, this thesis operates with the hypothesis that Kirino borrows from the genres of utopian and/or dystopian fiction (both are viable vehicles for social and political criticism, as will be shown at greater length in Chapter 3) to achieve similar goals. Shedding light on her use of utopian/dystopian elements is also intriguing in that Kirino seems to be interested in genres or themes which are not necessarily booming in Japan, and if she takes up popular genres, she does this in rather unusual ways (e.g. the 'female hard-boiled' subgenre of crime fiction). In more concrete terms, I will try to show how Kirino employs patterns of utopia/dystopia and how these mesh with patterns present within her own oeuvre. Further, the thesis should illustrate how a utopian society is constructed in *Poritikon* and to what extent this society is portrayed as functional, as well as in what ways this society serves as a social commentary and/or criticism on Japan's (current) situation. It is also of interest to find out to what ends *Poritikon* can be seen as a new direction in Kirino's writing and sees her exploring new subject matter, or whether she only operates with the utopian/dystopian genre on a more formal level and follows a 'literary agenda' as present in her earlier works – eventually raising the bigger question of the importance of genre itself within Kirino's writing.

2. Kirino Natsuo – the facts and the fiction

The following chapter will introduce Kirino Natsuo as a writer in a more complex manner than is often the case: Not as a genre writer or as a representative for one or other tendency within the Japanese literary scene. Precisely this often happens with most of her work's assessments, and the big picture of her writing output tends to be ignored or misrepresented. By juxtaposing a number of prominent currents of critical thought on Kirino Natsuo in the first sub-chapter (2.1), I intend to illustrate not only the wide scope of her work itself, but of the discourse on it as well. The second sub-chapter (2.2) explores recurrent patterns in Kirino's themes and forms of writing. The following thus aims to provide a firm basis for reading *Poritikon* as a “Kirino novel”, and to position it within the broader context of her oeuvre.

Kirino Natsuo was born in 1951 in Kanazawa and lived in Sendai and Sapporo before moving to Tōkyō, where she has stayed since. She says she feels uncomfortable when referred to as a Kanazawa native, since her family was a *tenkinzoku* (meaning her father would be transferred from place to place because of his work) and she actually has no memories of Kanazawa, calling Sapporo “closest to home” (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:157). She also admits the influence of this lifestyle on her work, having the sense that there is “nothing but the present” and describes herself as being a “floating existence” (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:158). With nobody talking to her in her middle school in Tōkyō, Kirino admits she might have been a target of bullying without realizing it (*ibid.*).

Kirino experienced the rise and fall of counter-cultural values as a college student in what she calls her “dark twenties” (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:165), seeing these values collapse during the bubble era when she worked as a (magazine) writer before having a child in 1982, stating that in the 1980s she felt “pretty much dead” (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:167). Feeling discontent with any of the number of jobs she had, she came to the realization that she was unable to live the average working life (Kirino 2005:87). She had started to write scenarios around 1979, though she felt they were no good, and looking to occupy herself while staying at home with her child, she turned to writing romance novels. However, even then she thought she didn't have the talent to write and saw her writing (she was also writing junior novels and stories for manga) only as a means to earn money (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:168). Be that as may, it was through this work that she started writing “proper novels”, admitting that even she herself was surprised by such route (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2012:41-42).

Her big breakthrough came in 1997 with the novel *OUT*. Kirino considered it her last chance at writing, as it seemed she couldn't afford her workplace rent anymore if the novel didn't sell (Katō 2010).

It was also born out of desperation with her editor, who had rejected two manuscripts of what would become *Yawaraka na hoho* (“Soft Cheeks”, 1999), in these early drafts a novel featuring her female private eye, Murano Miro. Kirino then decided to write a different novel, getting the idea of “middle-aged women who have nowhere to go” (Kirino 2005:130-131). It took her almost two years to write, which resulted in a very small first edition (13.000 copies), but the novel managed to “explode” through word of mouth, paving the way for Kirino being awarded the Mystery Writers of Japan Award, receiving a nomination for the prestigious Naoki Prize and the first place in the annual mystery novel ranking *Kono misuteri ga sugoi!* (Kirino 2005:132). It can well be said that *OUT* helped Kirino to achieve the prestigious status she is enjoying as a writer now.

2.1 An ‘out’ writer: Positioning Kirino Natsuo in Japan’s literary landscape

To “define” Kirino Natsuo as a writer is an enormously complicated – if not impossible – task. She herself has on numerous occasions expressed her discontent at being labeled (see end of 1.1.5), and this discontent is clearly visible in her oeuvre as well. It is, however, not an uninteresting exercise. If anything, the various definitions and viewpoints on her work offer a glimpse into its complexity, and might perhaps also serve to situate Kirino within the context of contemporary Japanese literature.

The difficulty of classifying Kirino's work can very well be illustrated through the variety of print media in which her novels had been serialized before being published in book form. These range from literary periodicals such as *Shinchō* (*Tōkyō-jima* [“Tokyo Island”; 2008]), *Shūkan bunshun* (*Gurotesuku* [“Grotesque”, 2003] or *Poritikon* [2011], the latter also having been published in the monthly *Bungeishunjū*), *Ōru yomimono* (*Kōgen* [“Light Source”; 2000] or *Gyokuran* [“Yulan”; 2001]) or *Yasei jidai* known for serialization of so-called “light novels” (*Midori no doku* [“Green Poison”; 2011]), through leading national newspapers (*Metabora* [“Metabola”, 2007] in *Asahi shinbun*, *Tamamoe!* [“Awaken Your Spirit!”, 2005] in *Mainichi shinbun* and *Yasashii otona* [“Gentle Adults”; 2010] in *Yomiuri shinbun*), up to a lifestyle magazine for women (*VERY*, which published *Hapinesu* [“Happiness”, 2013] in 2012). Her publication record also does not document any sort of turn towards exclusively “high” media outlets: she started publishing *Daku onna* (“Woman Embracing”) in the January 2013 issue of the literary magazine *Shōsetsu shinchō* just before the book publication of *Hapinesu* the following month.

The awards Kirino has received also fall into a number of distinct fields: her first major award was

the Edogawa Rampo Award³ in 1993 (for *Kao ni furikakaru ame* [“Rain Falling On Her Face”]), followed by the Mystery Writers of Japan Award in 1998 (*Nihon Suiri Sakka Kyōkai Shō*, for *OUT*). She received the most prestigious entertainment fiction award, the Naoki Prize, in 1999 for *Yawaraka na hoho*. Other prizes include the Izumi Kyōka Prize for Literature (2003, for *Gurotesuku*) or the Tanizaki Prize (2008, for *Tōkyō-jima*), both of which are awarded to works of high literary merit, or the Fujin Kōron Literary Prize (2005, for *Tamamoe!*) awarded to a work of so-called *joryū bungaku* (women's literature). *Nanika aru* (“Something's There”; 2010) was even awarded two, rather disparate, prizes: the *Shimase ren'ai bungaku-shō* for romance novels in 2010 and the Yomiuri Prize in 2011.

2.1.1 Kirino hard-boiled: Kirino Natsuo as a “mystery writer”

Although she has published romance novels since 1984 under the pen name of Kirino Natsuo, her debut as a writer is often marked with the release of *Kao ni furikakaru ame* (Sasaki 2008/2010:372) in 1993, which is also the first of her novels to be found in the chronologically arranged bibliography on her homepage (Kirino n.d.). This novel, awarded the 39th Edogawa Rampo Award, is also the first in the series featuring Murano Miro, the first female private detective in Japanese literature (Seaman 2004b:189). Until now, the series includes three “Miro” novels (*Kao ni furikakaru ame*, *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru* [“Night Abandoned by Angels”; 1994] and *Dāku* [“Dark”, 2002]), a spin-off novel featuring Miro's father (*Mizu no nemuri, hai no yume* [“Sleep in Water, Dream in Ashes”; 1995]) and a collection of short stories (*Rōzugāden* [“Rose Garden”, 2000]). Apart from the Miro series, Kirino has also written a mystery novel situated in the female pro-wrestling milieu, *Faiabōru burūsu* (“Fireball Blues”, 1995), with accompanying short stories published in *Shōsetsu subaru* in 1996 and released as a *bunko* paperback in 2001 under the title *Faiabōru burūsu 2*.

Her pioneering position as a writer of female hard-boiled fiction, however, must be situated within the larger boom of female detective fiction in Japan, primarily a phenomenon of the 1990s (other authors being, for instance, Miyabe Miyuki or Nonami Asa): Amanda Seaman establishes Miyabe's *Kasha* (“Chariots of Fire”) which was released in 1992 as the most anticipated novel of the season and states that it was a “watershed moment”, paving the way for other female mystery writers (Seaman 2004a:1). Saitō explains the popularity of female crime fiction writers, on one hand, with their effective portrayal of Japan's social issues from a feminist standpoint (as is the case with female hard-boiled writing in the

³ This award is granted to new talent in mystery fiction.

USA as well). But she also points out that the framework of the so-called social school of mystery (*shakai-ha*) is present in these novels, and that this sub-genre of Japanese crime fiction lends itself especially well to television and film adaptations. The godfather of *shakai-ha* literature, Matsumoto Seichō, would be a prime example of this trend – almost all of his works have been adapted either for the small or the big screen (Saito 2007:241). Matsumoto himself was more interested in depicting the postwar Japanese society, its social disparities and the crimes which arise from these, rather than solving puzzles – the form of detective fiction only making these stories more accessible to the readers (Saito 2007:189). It is also within this sub-genre that women could establish themselves as crime fiction writers, pioneered by Niki Etsuko, whom Saito describes as a forerunner of the 1990s mystery boom (Saito 2007:193).

It should also be noted that even these early works do not strictly conform to genre conventions. Kirino herself says she felt constrained after receiving the Rampo Award – more so than while she was writing junior novels – because of the expectations placed upon her as a “mystery writer”; she also claimed that she didn’t understand the framework and form of the mystery genre that well (Kirino/Minagawa 2009/2012:42). In part, this might stem from the subversive nature of female hard-boiled fiction, which Rebecca Copeland describes as producing “feminist art” (Copeland 2004:251). Copeland also points out how *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru* does not fulfill the traditional formula according to which the detective restores social order by punishing the criminal. Miro doesn't turn the criminal over to the police and instead lets the murderer escape into a certain suicide, possibly because both the police and the criminal are representatives of the patriarchal system which caused the crime in the first place (Copeland 2004:264). Upon receiving the Rampo Award, Kirino herself described *Kao ni furikakaru ame* as a romance novel in a mystery disguise, saying she doesn't like getting stuck in patterns (Kirino 2005:275).

In her commentary on *Faiabōru burūsu*, the late writer Sagisawa Megumu says:

“...this book is not just a novel portraying the world of female professional wrestling. It's also a crime novel where women stand up resolutely against a crime, but still more, in a lot of ways, it is a story of the growth of the young, hopeless female wrestler Chikada.” (Sagisawa 1998:300)

Thus, she does not first and foremost identify the text as a mystery novel. Such description wouldn't be fitting either: Although billed as a mystery on the book cover, the novel focuses much more on the lives and interactions of female wrestlers. The two protagonists do solve a crime with the help of a

reporter, but this plotline is only of secondary importance, being introduced midway through the novel. In the short stories collected in *Faiabōru burūsu 2*, Kirino does away with crimes completely, depicting various episodes in the lives of the female wrestlers instead. In her study on *Mizu no nemuri, hai no yume*, Matsugu positions the novel within Kirino's oeuvre as an important turning point in her authorial evolution (Matsugu 2011:488); according to her, Kirino is taking “a new step in genre bending by crossing the boundary between high and low literatures” (Matsugu 2011:489). Matsugu reads the novel as a critical examination, or deconstruction, of Kawabata Yasunari's *Nemureru bijo* (“The House of Sleeping Beauties”, 1961) in that the establishment with the sleeping girls is treated as a brothel and their procurement as crime (Matsugu 2011:496)⁴.

Kirino's reluctance to being called a mystery writer also brought her criticism within the Japanese literary scene. While she admits she was aiming to become a mystery writer when she submitted *Kao ni furikakaru ame* for the Rampo Award, she goes on to explain that in the span of four years, she started to feel limited as a “mystery writer” (Kirino 2005:269). In an interview for *Gekkan Playboy* in 1998, she likened mystery novels to *bentō* boxes, saying that the writer always has to keep form in mind, and that she has “thought of giving up on *bentō* boxes and starting the cooking anew” (Kirino 2005:269), that is, writing freely regardless of a genre. She was criticized rather harshly by the mystery scholar and critic Sekiguchi Ensei, who has stated the opinion that she never wrote mystery novels in the first place and that she shouldn't have applied for the Rampo Award if she never had the intention of writing them (Kirino 2005:269). He also claims that *Kao ni furikakaru ame* could only be as broadly received in Japan as it was because it was written by a woman, features a female detective and is written in the form of a female hard-boiled, rare for Japan, but missing the “male logic” crucial for the hard-boiled genre (Kirino 2005:277). The acclaimed mystery author Higashino Keigo has judged Kirino's *bentō* metaphor to be a very narrow definition of a mystery novel, preferring to call all novels which utilize riddles to entertain readers as mysteries (Kirino 2005:272-273).

While she does not count Kirino's breakthrough work *OUT* (1997) as part of her output as a “mystery writer” (Kirino 2005:269), Lisette Gebhardt does position it within the scope of *shakai-ha* in that social defects take its central stage (Gebhardt 2007a:453). However, she also points out that *OUT* breaks with genre boundaries, formulating the feelings of frustration which have set in in Japan after the

⁴ It might be a point of contest within the novel itself whether (and by whom) the establishment is treated as a brothel: for instance, a friend of one of the sleeping girls (and victims) says in her letter to protagonist Murano: “I've heard rumors that she was prostituting herself. But as far as I know, she did not. I only heard she did the sleeping pill job a number of times. [...] But it came out in newspapers that she was a prostitute, and I couldn't bear not telling it wasn't so.” (Kirino 1995/2002:443; author's translation).

burst of the economic bubble in 1989, frustration with the competitive and consumerist society (Gebhardt 2010:106-107). Still more interesting is writer Shinoda Setsuko's description of *Tamamoe!* (2005), a story of a 59-year old widow beginning a new life, as feeling like an 'expansion of *shakai-ha* novels' due to its realistic and thorough portrayal of the old and young, men and women, their respective occupations and the (social) classes they belong to. It also implements 'small riddles' (presumably about the protagonist's late husband), all in the form of an "everyday drama" (Shinoda 2005/2007:387-388). Lianying Shan (2011) might be offering a similar reading of *Gyokuran*, stating that crimes in the novel are manifestations of the social ills of male-dominated Japan, with the agents and victims of these being men and women, respectively. According to Shan, the illnesses of the two female protagonists (who are separated by storylines taking place approximately 70 years apart), tuberculosis and insomnia, are manifestations of their social problems (Shan 2011:97). However, it shouldn't be ignored that even the embezzlement which Shan introduces as "the crime" in the novel (Shan 2011:95) is never pursued by any detective figure, let alone punished; it simply figures as a plot element which becomes a life-changing event of the female protagonist in the "past" storyline, Namiko.

Preferring not to be called a mystery writer, or rather claiming that she were unable to write mystery novels properly does not mean Kirino abandoned the genre for good. When asked whether she was rejecting mystery after the release of *Yawaraka na hoho* (which ironically began its life as a Miro novel [Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:28]), she answered she did not know, and has later stated she might return "to make *bentō*" again, just not at that very point (Kirino 2005:271). She also does not consider her Miro series to be finished. In an interview with writer Yū Miri, she has stated that she was thinking of continuing the series with Miro's child (born at the end of *Dāku*) being about ten years old. However, a new Miro novel has not materialized as of this writing – and even if it did at some point in the future, it is quite clear that Kirino will not return to her roots completely: the last installment of the Miro series differed in tone considerably already, much to the dismay of some readers (Fukuda 2004/2010:289-290).

2.1.2 "A woman writer": *joryū bungaku* and feminism

Another of Kirino Natsuo's positions within the Japanese literary scene is that of a *joryū sakka* ("woman writer"), being called as such by fellow writer Hayashi Mariko, to name just one example (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:68). Labeling her a *joryū sakka* places Kirino in the context of the so-called *joryū bungaku* ("women's literature"). While it is questionable how legitimate it is to relegate women's

writings to a genre in itself in the first place (implicitly assigning them a separate place in Japanese literature as there is no “men's literature” to speak of), it also positions these writers in a lineage of canonized women writers of the 20th century such as Enchi Fumiko, Ariyoshi Sawako or Hayashi Fumiko⁵. Although an easily understandable example of such positioning is provided by Shinoda Setsuko when she points out that the subject and style of *Tamamoe!* resemble those of 20th century women's literature (Shinoda 2005/2007:387), Kirino has been situated within this “genre” already with the relatively early *OUT*, further complicating its usually marketed status of crime fiction. Wendy Nakanishi explicitly refers to *OUT* as an example of Ariyoshi's legacy in highlighting women's issues in literature, with Kirino being one of the writers influenced by Ariyoshi in that the four protagonists are portrayed as victims rather than criminals. By extension, she also sees the writers of the 1990s female detective fiction boom in general as “Ariyoshi's benefactors” (Nakanishi 2007).

Another case study of *OUT* as women's literature is provided by Lisette Gebhardt. She defines the themes of women writers of the 20th century (more precisely authors of the 1960s up to the 1980s, such as the aforementioned Enchi Fumiko, but also Ōba Minako, Kōno Taeko or Tsushima Yūko) as restrictions placed upon women through sociocultural norms in public and private spheres, complex and often fantastic scenarios of male/female relationships, “gender utopia” and gender warfare, as well as search for identity in times of modernity. This “intellectual school” of women writers is followed in the 1990s, which are informed by the structural changes in Japanese media culture, by writers of entertainment fiction who prominently take up women's issues in their work (such as Ekuni Kaori, Kawakami Hiromi or Kakuta Mitsuyo). Gebhardt sees Kirino as a part of this trend, which the literary critic Saitō Minako titles “L-literature” – the L standing for “ladies, love, liberation” (Gebhardt 2007b:137-138). Gebhardt further elaborates on this lineage with defining the theme of the “Japanese system as women's rapist” as already present in the 1970s, citing Enchi Fumiko's novel *Onnazaka* (“The Waiting Years”, 1957, eng. 1971) and Yoshiyuki Rie's short story *Ido no hoshi* (“Stars in the Well”, 1975) as examples. She reads *OUT* as a work with the same themes: the suffering of Japanese women in a cold, hierarchically structured society, suffering from traditional role expectations and from a lack of opportunities for self-realization. The prime difference seems to be the way these themes are treated: While the protagonists of the earlier literature remain in the position of victims, Kirino's protagonists choose revenge (Gebhardt 2007b:143-144).

Closely tied to a position of a writer of “women's literature” is that of a feminist one, which Kirino

⁵ It is worth noting that Hayashi Fumiko is the protagonist of Kirino's novel *Nanika aru*.

herself rejects – although, as Gebhardt states, her works offer much “feministically inspiring agitation potential” (Gebhardt 2007a:452). This rejection might be in part formed due to her negative experiences with the feminist movement in the 1970s as a college student, when she was criticized for wearing lipstick and miniskirts, although Matsugu is quick to remind of the prominent critique against sexism in Kirino's work (Matsugu 2011:491). Shan sees Kirino's close attention to female psychology as a reason for her being labeled a feminist writer (Shan 2011:94), while Mochizuki argues for new possibilities for feminist literature in Kirino's sincere description of women's desires and sexuality, grouping her together with Tawada Yōko and (outside of Japan) Angela Carter as writers “enjoying the weak side of their femininity as well” (Mochizuki 2010:60-61).

2.1.3 “Writer of the weak”: Kirino Natsuo as a “proletarian writer”

As Lisette Gebhardt points out, many of the *joryū bungaku* authors of the early 20th century were also labeled as authors of proletarian literature due to the politically involved nature of their works (Gebhardt 2007b:138). This is an interesting line to draw as Kirino has also been labeled as an author of contemporary proletarian literature, particularly in connection with *OUT*. In 1998, novelist and critic Chūjō Shōhei cites her as one of the representatives (alongside Hanamura Mangetsu, Uchida Shungiku or Akasaka Mari) of the new current in Japanese literature which has shifted in focus from introverted, Murakami Haruki-esque characters to an expressive “proletarian literature”; Kirino also represents a “proletarian writer” to the writer and scholar Shimada Masahiko (cf. Gebhardt 2010:47-48). Chūjō arguments for Kirino as “proletarian” due to the detailed descriptions of work relations (cf. Gebhardt 2010:106), although such generalization would be erroneous in the greater context of Kirino's work because she is not exclusively focusing on blue collar characters, as Chūjō's positioning might suggest. The fact that the four protagonists are blue collar workers might in fact be more telling of gender inequality than the hardship of blue collar workers in general. Kirino herself states that the situation in the novel is one in which “the husbands are white collar workers while the wives are blue collars”, this being their only option if they want to work at all (Shigematsu/Kirino 2009/2012:97). On the other hand, she has also spoken of *OUT* as *Kani kōsen* (“The Crab Cannery Ship”, 1929)⁶ for part-time workers (Seaman 2006:199).

⁶ A classic of Japanese proletarian literature, *Kani kōsen* (1929) by Kobayashi Tajiki describes the exploitation of workers on a crab fishing ship.

Referring to the example of *Metabora* (2007), Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt points to the problems of its reading as a proletarian novel. On a very basic level, Kirino forgoes the construction of distinguishable, hierarchic classes, a basic assumption of proletarian literature, in *Metabora*. The permeating feeling of hopelessness which runs through the novel not only sets it apart from proletarian literature at large (since proletarian texts were generally understood as “creative imaginations of a brighter future”, influenced by revolutionary thought), but also from other Kirino's works, citing *OUT*, namely the “emancipation from Japan” of Masako, as an example (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:149-150). Iwata-Weickgenannt also argues that *Metabora* can hardly be read as a “seriously engaging text with a (consistent) political agenda”, or as a novel “giving voice to the voiceless”, and that the novel ultimately provides little impetus for social change (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:154-155). This is also an observation Seaman makes regarding *OUT*; she suggests Kirino is not looking for the way the factory treats the workers, but rather seeks to highlight women's hardships – Masako's escape from Japan only further undermining a proletarian reading (Seaman 2006:199). This unwillingness to provide concrete solutions is consistent with Kirino's earlier “mystery” work, as well as with the tendency of the 1990s female crime fiction writers in general (Seaman 2004b:189).

2.1.4 From “yellow trash” to “pure literature”: other readings of Kirino Natsuo

Lisette Gebhardt suggests a reading of Kirino's *I'm sorry, mama* (2004) not as “proletarian literature” per se, but as its extension: “yellow trash” literature. She argues that although *I'm sorry, mama* portrays the lower strata of society, Kirino opts for “grotesque hyper-realism” instead of “proletarian” social criticism. She further explains that this “hyper-realism” is a strongly allegoric, “mean simulation of reality” with a psycho-hygienic function, occupying a special position within contemporary Japanese “literature of precarity”. Gebhardt therefore points out that *I'm sorry, mama* shouldn't be read either as “failed crime fiction with a socially critical attitude”, or as a “socially critical insight into the slope between rich and poor”, but rather as a piece demonstrating Kirino's special approach between the two (Gebhardt 2010:223-224). Kirino is interested in the lower strata of society not from the point of view of an involved position (suggesting a “proletarian revival”), instead implementing the subversiveness of American “trash” culture within the Japanese literary system, her taboo themes attacking not least its conservative world (Gebhardt 2007a:463-364). Gebhardt, however, also points out that Kirino's “sociological” questioning of women's roles doesn't allow her “yellow trash” piece to be read as pure entertainment, but

that it shows her genuine interest in these issues (Gebhardt 2010:227).

Iwata-Weickgenannt cites *Metabora*, and Kirino Natsuo's work in general, as an example of successfully addressing the theme of Japanese precarity as a sub-theme of entertainment literature (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:145). Positioning Kirino's work firmly as “entertainment literature” also suggests a close relationship with popular sectors of the literary market and literary trends, further affirmed by her aim to become a female mystery writer at the time of female crime fiction boom. Gebhardt also suggests a reading of *Metabora* as a dark variation on *ikikata no hon* (which might translate approximately to “self-help books”) in that it proposes abandoning the sick Japanese society (Gebhardt 2010:228). She also understands *Tamamoe!* to be a kind of *ikikata no hon* for senior citizens and thus a cleverly timed release, since self-help literature has been an actual trend at the time of its publication (Gebhardt 2006).

An interesting counterpoint is provided by the literary critic Sasaki Atsushi in his two commentaries on *Kōgen* (2000) and *Tōkyō-jima* (2008). While he describes the former as “top-notch entertainment”, he is quick to point out that he doesn't consider it to be a “well-made novel” in the sense of fulfilling expectations (Sasaki 2007:424). He also expresses his agreement with the tagline used at the time of its first release as a *tankōbon*, “a novel unlike anyone has ever read” (*daremo yonda koto no nai shōsetsu*), noting that it applies to the whole sequence of novels in which *Kōgen* belongs – *Yawaraka na hoho*, *Gyokuran* and *Gurotesuku* (Sasaki 2007:422). On the other hand, he highlights the fact that *Tōkyō-jima* was the first of Kirino's novels to be serialized in a *junbungaku* (“pure” or high literature) magazine (Sasaki 2010:366), calling it a “bridge between Kirino Natsuo and *junbungaku* proper” (Sasaki 2010:372). A similar positioning is suggested by the Japanese psychologist Saitō Tamaki in his commentary on *Zangyakuki* when he refuses to assign Kirino's texts to one genre, but for the time being suggests calling her novels *kankei bungaku* (“relationship literature”) in the tradition of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's works (Saitō 2010:255).

2.1.5 Kirino in other contexts

The reception of Kirino's works has not always been consistent, and her writing has also brought her considerable criticism, such as the reactions against her likening mystery writing to *bentō* boxes, as cited above (see 1.1.1). Kirino even speaks of “bashing” in her serialized essay *Hakujakyō itanshinmon* (“Inquisition of the White Snake Sect”; Kirino 2005:281). This reception and her readership (particularly among male readers) have shifted, though. She recounts an episode demonstrating hostile reactions from

men after the release of *OUT*, when a male radio host didn't want to speak to her, finally asking her whether she thinks it was alright to kill a person. On the other hand, Kirino says that her male readership has already increased by the point *Gurotesuku* has been released in book form (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:62). Yet, on another occasion, she states that men and women have read *Gurotesuku* with considerable difference, with many men reading it as a “sex story”, something which didn't occur among her female readers (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:133). *OUT* also had difficulties winning literary awards due to its allegedly “anti-social views”, though it did manage to win the Mystery Writers Association award eventually (Kirino 2005:132). Kirino also notes that while *OUT* was her big break as an author, it also seems it made her an ‘out writer’, that is, a strange writer “who never takes the royal road” (Kirino 2005:132-133) in the public eye. However, in an interview with Matsuura Rieko from 1999, she claims that she wanted to stay outside of the literary mainstream (Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:27).

Apart from the various groupings together with rather disparate authors and literary streams as illustrated above, fellow writer Hoshino Tomoyuki sees Kirino Natsuo as a member of the counter-cultural generation of the 60s and 70s which he calls a “godsend”. He sees Kirino's literary “world” as one created through this counter-cultural worldview and argues for its effectiveness in contemporary Japanese society (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:163-164). At the same time, he singles Kirino out from her contemporaries – especially male writers – in that he sees their literary efforts to confront society as often ineffective, unlike hers (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:188).

Her own self-perception as an “out writer” notwithstanding, Lisette Gebhardt attributes Kirino the status of a pioneer and trendsetter within contemporary Japanese literature (Gebhardt 2007a:451). The popularity and/or desirability of her material in other media is clearly visible: many of her works have been turned into television films, series or feature films, beginning already in 1994 with the adaptation of *Kao ni furikakaru ame*. *OUT* and *Tamamoe!* have even received both small and big screen treatment, while *Gurotesuku* has been offered for adaptation to director Sono Sion, who decided to make his own story inspired by the real life incident depicted in the novel for his 2011 film *Koi no tsumi* (Cinema Tribune 2011). Ichikawa Makoto, the planner and director of the journal *Waseda bungaku*, substantiates this status by calling Kirino, Kakuta Mitsuyo and Yoshida Shūichi forerunners of current writers such as Hirano Keiichirō, Maijō Ōtarō, Itō Keikaku or Azuma Hiroki with their depictions of “diversification of the subject within a networked space” through utilization of multiple personalities or selves, as well as their narratives dealing with events that take place within parallel worlds (Ichikawa 2011:2). Gebhardt also sees Kirino as an author of an “odorless J-literature”, consumed outside Japan by readers not

explicitly interested in Japan otherwise – which is a different situation than that in the 1960s or 70s (Gebhardt 2007a:465). Kirino herself, however, has expressed some frustration with her position on the Western market, feeling her works serve “literary capitalism” with their being marketed as “intense” or violent (*hageshii*). She recounts how futile she felt upon this discovery precisely because she found they could give an impulse for change, and because, by rejecting genres, she managed to create a genre in itself (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:177-178).

“I don't like enlightening stories, stories of protagonists' growth, I am not a *shakai-ha* or a political writer. I just portray how people live in this society now,” Kirino says in an interview for *Asahi shinbun* (Katō 2010). In her speech on the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, she addresses her many labels as follows:

As I depict shocking and disturbing crimes in many of my novels, I have been known as either a noir or crime-fiction writer. Since I also take up women's issues in my novels, I have also been called a feminist novelist. I must say that I very much dislike being defined by the boundaries of a genre or, for that matter, being defined, period, because I only write about the truths I see using my own imagination. As I mentioned earlier, I take from people's unconscious and think about the times we live in. I do not know where the novel will take me. When I am defined by a genre, I am defined from one particular angle. I worry that my work will not reach readers beyond those boundaries. That makes me extremely anxious. I write believing that the power of the imagination can change the world. (PEN American Center 2007)

2.2 The Kirino method: recurrent themes in Kirino Natsuo's work

Kirino has earned herself a reputation of a “dark” author, a reputation which is very much used as an asset in Western markets and is clearly tangible through the book covers, especially of the English translations (for instance, *OUT* depicts a woman pointing a knife's tip at her eye, while *Gurotesuku's* cover shows a portrait of a pale Asian woman with smeared eyeliner and lipstick). Yū Miri claims it is Kirino's extraordinary power to construct “a world hidden in darkness”, and that if crimes are the tip of an iceberg, she dives to its bottom, only to dive further away where “light doesn't come through” (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:132). Lisette Gebhardt uses the title of Kirino's website (“Bubblonia”) as a metaphor for the world she depicts – a post-bubble Japan permeated by loneliness, isolation in the bourgeois family, disoriented youth, burnt-out employees, lack of personal space and collective pressure, consumerism and excessive debts – and claims that Kirino's message to sabotage or abandon this society, dominated by “broken men”, is a novum in Japanese literature (Gebhardt 2007a:452). She also highlights

Kirino's orientation towards the less privileged and the social defects within these milieus, citing a familial breakup in *OUT*, child abuse in *I'm sorry, mama* and *Zangyakuki*, the Chinese mafia and a religious sect in *Gurotesuku*, as well as specific issues of the elderly in *Tamamoe!* (as members of the aging society, *kōreika shakai*) as examples (Gebhardt 2007a:463). The literary critic Fukuda Kazuya, referring to the example of *Yawaraka na hoho*, assumes an influence of Russian writers such as Gogol or Dostoyevsky – in the sense that Kirino forsakes hope in her writing and doesn't grant her readers understanding, satisfaction or catharsis in the case they might be looking for them (Fukuda 2004:289-290).

However, this is an opinion not shared by all interpretations of Kirino's work. In what Gebhardt calls a “gothic initiation”, the protagonists must experience the darker sides of life to find themselves (Gebhardt 2007b:151). That often allows them to move on to a new life, such as in *OUT*, *Tamamoe!* or *Yawaraka na hoho*. Minagawa Hiroko opines that a running motif in Kirino's work, precisely because of the “deep abyss” which she often portrays, is a “search for light” in a metaphysical sense (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2012:37). Hayashi Mariko, too, concludes that ultimately, there is hope for Kirino's characters (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:68), while Bandō Masako says that the notion of security in life is a fallacy, and that by writing about extreme conditions (as they both do), they warn against this (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2012:231-232).

Writing about the darker sides of life also means taking up taboo topics. Kirino has expressed this by saying that at first, she thought to write meant to lose face, and that bit by bit, she has “become a monster” in the public eye (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:67-68). She was dealing with female sexuality as a running theme in the early Miro novels where the female protagonist gets involved with in the spheres of S&M or pornography. Her greater concerns here are affirmed by Seaman's statement that these themes are not meant to provide titillation but function as a stage for social commentary (Seaman 2004a:86), although for the time, the Miro novels were striking for their frank depiction of sexuality (alongside Shibata Yoshiki's “Murakami Riko” series [Seaman 2004a:87]). Matsuura Rieko also lauds Kirino for her “groundbreaking” portrayal of women's sexuality (Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:26), although Kirino admits that writing sex scenes is, for her, the hardest thing and she avoids them whenever she can (Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:24). Gebhardt also states that Kirino breaks yet another taboo with her discussion of the sexuality of the elderly as something completely natural in *Tamamoe!* (Gebhardt 2006).

Kirino's treatment of family, another theme of hers that is often reflected by literary critics and scholars, might be considered taboo-breaking as well. The importance of this theme is touched upon by

Kirino in an interview with Satō Masaru, when she remarks how greatly family itself changes alongside societal collapse (Satō/Kirino 2009/2012:197). Further examples of links between family and society can thus be established: be it the estranged mother in *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru*, who is complicit with the oppressive patriarchal system and therefore not handed over to the police by Miro (Copeland 2004:266), the housewives in *OUT* exploited by both their families and the system, or the role of housewife and mother which can't possibly bring any fulfillment to Toshiko in *Tamamoe!*, but which is the role she is expected to play – with Kirino suggesting abandonment of these constraints (Gebhardt 2006).

2.2.1 “Bubbloners”: Kirino's characters

Most of the writing on Kirino Natsuo's characters focuses strongly on her female protagonists, which, while reinforcing her position as that of a “feminist writer”, also takes away the attention from her numerous male figures. Starting, at the latest, with Miro's father in *Mizu no nemuri, hai no yume*⁷, she has often featured other male characters providing their own narratives (as her trademark is a multiple-perspective structure) and given the same attention to their inner worlds as that of their female counterparts. At times, within her trademark framework of a narrative from multiple perspectives, she provides her male characters equal or even bigger space than that of the female ones (Yukio and Tadashi in *Gyokuran*, Arimura, Sanzō and Takashi in *Kōgen* or Watanabe, Manta-san and GM/Mori Gunji in *Tōkyō-jima*); in some cases, she does away with female protagonists altogether (*Metabora*, *Yasashii otona*). Mochizuki argues for the “fairness” in the approach of switching perspectives between male and female characters in that it lets the readers judge the state of affairs by themselves (Mochizuki 2010:58), though she ultimately states the opinion that Kirino endows her male characters with pronounced weaknesses as opposed to strong heroines such as Masako in *OUT* or Kiyoko in *Tōkyō-jima* (Mochizuki 2010:60).

In any case, Kirino's focus on the margins of society has already been taken up by the umbrella term of “Bubblonia”, used by Lisette Gebhardt, who also provides a short list of Kirino's “marginal” characters – workers on assembly lines, waitresses, chambermaids, domestic and laundry helpers, prostitutes, immigrants or the homeless (Gebhardt 2007a:463). This focus has been present in her work

⁷ Murano Senzō is the first male protagonist of a Kirino Natsuo *novel* – however, her short story “Gekka no rakuen” (“Moonlight Paradise”, first published in the magazine *Shōsetsu subaru* in January 1994) provides an even earlier example of one in Kirino's work in general. In fact, four of the six short stories collected in her first short story anthology *Sabiru kokoro* (“Rusty Heart”, 1997), including “Gekka no rakuen”, deal with male protagonists.

since the early Miro novels, in which the private eye bonds with Filipino bar girls (*Kao ni furikakaru ame*) or with her gay neighbor Tomo (*Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru*). Copeland describes Tomo's part in the novel as that of indicating an ironic role reversal, insofar as he is endowed with qualities more associated with wifeliness – as opposed to Miro – and that he represents a fellow “renegade from the family system” (Copeland 2004:263). She also reads his character's function as exemplifying a contrasting, non-threatening concept of male sexuality (as opposed to the world of pornography) and a companion to Miro in his refusal to collude either with the marriage system (as a sham) or staying in the closet – thus, by extension, in rejecting society's expectations concerning gender roles (Copeland 2004:264).

“Women should walk on the dark side”, as Kirino once wrote on an internet fan site (Akamoto 2001), and this motto certainly applies to many of her female characters. She has also expressed her anger at male writers who, to her, seem to only write about women who are “convenient” for them (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:69). She also refuses to conform to the “bitch or saint” scheme which seems to permeate canonized literature (Nishikawa/Kirino 2009/2012:265). This nonconformity has informed her unusual characters, and she comments that she felt like a pioneer after she had been told by a male reader that up until reading *OUT*, he didn't realize middle-aged women (*obasan*) had their own lives as well (Nishikawa/Kirino 2009/2012:264). Thus, particularly male readers are forced to confront themselves with “unpleasant” depictions of femininity, which has contributed to Kirino's reputation of communicating a “scary” impression of women – upon which she bluntly comments the problem might rather lie with male illusions about femininity (Hayashi/Kirino 2009/2012:62). On the other hand, she is lauded by women for portraying characters who feel like living beings (Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:22), and it is emphasized that with her “cool protagonists” (like those of the Miro novels, *Faiabōru burūsu* or *OUT*) she shows that women in the post-bubble era are getting strong, as opposed to an increase in “womanly men” (Sagisawa 1998:301). Since *OUT*, she has expressed her will to turn away from cool, “novel-like” protagonists like Masako and to rather portray small-minded people (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2012:49) and their “petty” or “horrible” qualities (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2012:234).

Although Kirino comments that she doesn't think the so-called *makeinu* (“losers”, single women in their 30s pursuing their careers rather than marriage) women “lose” at all, preferring to call them “role models” (Shigematsu/Kirino 2009/2012:99-100), her novels often show the opposite – *Gurotesuku* being perhaps the most striking example. This is also reflected by Mochizuki when she calls women in Kirino's novels “slaves of men” who often choose prostitution as means of escape, with marriage being an extreme

case of this slavery (Mochizuki 2010:52). Gebhardt observes that women in “Bubblonia” lack rights to personal development outside of their roles as mothers, as well as better work conditions. What they would need is a free society in which they could realize their individuality and sexuality, as well as being granted the reduction of sexist and racist hierarchies (Gebhardt 2007a:453).

2.2.2 Literary (de)constructions

Kirino Natsuo likens the structure of her novels to a tree: the protagonists, their characters and lives are a big trunk, with the drama which happens to them being the branches and leaves growing out of it. She says these branches occasionally turn, and that even though this tree might bend, “it aims for the sky as far as it can” (Saitō/Kirino 2009/2012:84). Although she did publish short stories in the past⁸, in 2003 she has admitted to writer Minagawa Hiroko that she had become unable to write short fiction and that every short story she writes was bound to become the beginning of a novel (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2012:47).

She also understands the element of “chance” to be a crucial part of her work, and admits that everything that happens to the characters can be considered accidental. She also claims that readers don't “forgive” accidents in fiction (Kirino 2005:119-120), but points out that since nobody knows the “true form of reality”, it is in itself very much fictional and accidental – that even in real life, nobody knows what tomorrow will bring (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:131-132). This is also what Sasaki Atsushi alludes to in his commentary on *Kōgen* when he claims that it is not a “well-made” novel and that, in its unpredictability and lack of any striking climax, it resembles reality (Sasaki 2003:424-425). Kirino herself states that she is not interested in writing “well-made” novels precisely because of this predictability, while alluding to an understanding of writing as craft, and a ‘well-made’ novel as a proof of this craft being mastered (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2012:55).

This reluctance to make “well-made” novels is clearly mirrored in Kirino's subversive approach to genre, something which has meanwhile become her trademark. This was already visible in her early Miro novels, as illustrated above with the description of *Kao ni furikakaru ame* as a ‘romance novel in mystery disguise’, her self-professed unwillingness to ‘stick to patterns’, the ‘genre betrayal’ in *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru* when Miro doesn't restore order as she “should”, or the treatment of the mystery in *Faiabōru burūsu* almost as a side-story in spite of the novel's billing as a mystery novel. Yū Miri points

⁸ These are published in five short story collections and as parts of *Hakujakyō itanshinmon*.

this out in the case of *OUT* as well, in that it doesn't provide relief "as an ordinary mystery would" (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:135). Matsuura Rieko calls *Yawaraka na hoho* an "anti-mystery" which was bound to attract criticism with its refusal to fulfill genre expectations (Matsuura/Kirino 2009/2012:28): the novel is a story of a mother whose daughter mysteriously disappears in Hokkaidō while visiting a family friend (her secret lover) and his family. The focus, however, is on the mother's coming to terms with losing her child, her feelings of guilt and her never-ending search, on which she is later joined by a terminally ill, retired police detective living his last days. Kirino "betrays" the closure expected by the readers in that they never get to know what happened, instead offering three possible scenarios (one of which seems to turn out implausible immediately) as dream sequences, and an account from the daughter's perspective as an epilogue. None of these provide a fully satisfactory explanation, which is further complicated by the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. The disappearance itself, in fact, only becomes a "means to an end" in exploring the psychology of the protagonists, and their respective coming to terms with life and death.

Lisette Gebhardt is more concrete in analyzing this "genre shifting", as she calls it: she argues that *Gurotesuku* combines elements of hard-boiled fiction, the epistolary novel and the bildungsroman, sensational journalism, the "light novel", "yellow trash" and the precarity literature with its "drama of descent" (Gebhardt 2011), while in *OUT*, she identifies elements of crime fiction, "L-literature" and romance fiction (Gebhardt 2007a:462-463). She also understands Kirino to counteract trends in contemporary Japanese literature, such as the prose of "self-search" (*jibun sagashi*) and "healing" (*iyashi*) (Gebhardt 2012:61), and calls her novels "anti-moratorium pieces" as Kirino puts her protagonists through hard lessons, at the end of which they have nothing left except for their freedom (Gebhardt 2010:228). A different example might be provided with *Zangyakuki* where the "moratorium" (refusing to become an adult) is part of the criminal situation in that the protagonist's abductor appears to be mentally challenged.

The deconstruction of the *iyashi* pattern in Kirino's works can also be illustrated on numerous examples. In *Metabora*, the author rejects the stereotypical image of Okinawa as a "paradise" by associating it with mass suicide and workers' exploitation, as well as with references to US military bases (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:152), which are traditionally ignored by the mainstream media in its Okinawa portrayals. The idea of spiritual healing is undermined by presenting the "hippie" holiday camp Paramani as yet another form of exploitation (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:151). In *Gyokuran*, the protagonist Yūko travels to Shanghai in order to study Chinese and possibly begin a new chapter in her life by leaving

Japan and her unhappy relationship behind – but even there, she ends up in a community of Japanese students and shallow sexual relationships. An unhappy fate in China is shared in a second storyline about her granduncle Tadashi and his girlfriend Namiko, who came to Shanghai with great expectations, only to end up being followed by pursuers of her husband (who had vanished after embezzling a large sum of money), with an undesirable job as a hostess and ill with tuberculosis, of which she later dies. In *Gyokuran*, the healing aspect is thus further undermined through the respective illnesses of the protagonists – Namiko's tuberculosis and Yūko's insomnia.

2.2.3 “Stranger than fiction”: relationships between fiction, fact and society in Kirino's work

“What I create is fiction, but [by doing so] I want to suggest that there might be truth to be found in fiction,” (Nishikawa/Kirino 2009/2012:263), Kirino Natsuo tells director Nishikawa Miwa in their interview, touching upon the prominent position this usually dichotomous relationship has in her work. It is often taken up in writing about Kirino, usually in discussions of her texts’ social relevance or involvement. Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt calls her works “accurate” in that they are based on thorough research, and that readers are “bound” to find real life parallels, which starkly contrasts with her ‘mannerist’ approach, especially in regards to violence (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2012:145). Gebhardt calls her works “milieu studies” and points out Kirino's research of respective localities, sometimes even outside of Japan such as China for *Gyokuran* or Cuba for the short story collection *Ambos Mundosu* (“Ambos Mundos”, 2005) to procure authentic impressions and information (Gebhardt 2007a:463). Works she consults are often listed in her books, such as her research on the Jesus' Ark sect (*Iesu no hakobune*) for *Yawaraka na hoho*, publications on film for *Kōgen* or 1920s shipping companies for *Gyokuran*.

To make no mistake, the “fiction” for Kirino seems to be the more important element than the parts of her novel in which she draws on real life. Sasaki describes her oscillation between the “real” and the fictitious as surpassing reality or facts and exposing “truth” solely through developing a story; according to him, she draws a line between her work and what he calls “real world” or “contemporary society” fiction (Sasaki 2010:370-371). Saitō Tamaki highlights the fact that *Zangyakuki*, which is loosely based on the so-called Niigata girl confinement incident (*Niigata shōjo kankin jiken*)⁹, takes a completely

⁹ Sano Fusako, a nine-year old schoolgirl, had been kidnapped in November 1990 and held in captivity until January 2000 by a mentally disturbed unemployed man, Satō Nobuyuki, within a walking distance of a *kōban* police station. She was discovered when Satō's mother called the police on an unrelated cause.

different approach than the mass media of the time which were primarily pursuing the fact that the abductor was a *hikikomori* (“shut-in” who withdraws from society). Kirino does not write “model novels”¹⁰ and, in Saitō's words, “doesn't stick stubbornly to reality” because her fiction can compete with reality in regards to its trueness (Saitō 2007:246-247). Sure enough, in *Zangyakuki* the crime only serves as the basis for the protagonist's psychological development and her subsequent becoming a novelist, which is the true focus of the novel (which, in itself, is presented as a novel-within-a-novel with the same title), and only takes up a relatively small part of the plot.

Literary critic Saitō Minako makes a similar case for *Gurotesuku*, which is partly based on the much publicized “TEPCO OL murder case” (*Tōden OL satsujin jiken*)¹¹. The public interest in the case was fueled by doubts about the sentence and about the double life of the victim as an elite employee and streetwalker; the case prompted the release of many fictional and non-fictional books. Saitō argues that with *Gurotesuku*, Kirino has approached the case from a different angle than those before her, concentrating on the “darkness in the heart” on the victim. She also claims that Kirino reaches far beyond fictionalization of the incident and that her novel will make readers forget the “real” background of the murder case (Saitō 2006:448).

An interesting example of blending fact with fiction presents itself with *Gyokuran*. The novel takes place in two periods, in the present and in the 1920s, with the 1920s timeline being an imagined account of Kirino's granduncle Tadashi's time in China. Kirino's real relative Tadashi submitted a non-fiction text about his voyages in China, called *Toraburu* (“Trouble”) to the magazine *Bungeishunjū*, where it was released in 1930. He was a two-time widower and came back to Japan after the war, submitting another text to *Bungeishunjū* (supposedly unreleased), sent his elder brother a farewell letter and disappeared. His whereabouts are still unknown (Kirino 2005:93-94). Parts of (real) Tadashi's *Toraburu* are used in *Gyokuran* as the protagonist Yūko's grand-uncle's diary. Through this account and his mysterious appearances as a ghost, Yūko learns about his time in Shanghai and Guangdong. Kirino fictionalizes his disappearance, starting off as a planned suicide and ending as a new life in anonymity as well in the last chapter.

A recent theme in regard to Kirino's relationship of fact and fiction is that of writers and writing, featured most prominently in the novels *IN* (2009) and *Nanika aru* (2010). Considering Matsugu's study

¹⁰ Saitō apparently means novels closely modeled on, or following, real-life incidents or personalities.

¹¹ Watanabe Yasuko, an employee at TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) moonlighting as a prostitute on the streets of Shibuya, had been murdered in March 1997. As of 2013, the murder is unresolved; a Nepalese man, Govinda Prasad Mainali, was convicted in 2000 for a life sentence in spite of serious doubts as to his guilt. He was formally acquitted of the crime in November 2012.

of *Mizu no nemuri, hai no yume* as a critical companion piece to Kawabata's *Nemureru bijo*, this subject matter might already have been foreshadowed in that early novel. The topic of writing emerges with *Zangyakuki*, featuring prominent reflections of the novelist protagonist (whose pen name, Kōmi Narumi, shares initials with Kirino Natsuo) on her profession and on the impact of the crime she's been a victim of on her becoming a writer. *IN*, intertextually related to Shimao Toshio's *Shi no toge* (Shiraishi 2011), is a novel which takes writers and writing for its subject – the protagonist is a writer working on a book about a mysterious lover of a famous writer (echoing the subject matter of *Shi no toge*, which is an autobiographic account of Shimao's marital crisis and his wife's mental illness, triggered by the discovery of his infidelity). Gebhardt observes the depiction of the writers' world as one characterized by malice, by “psychological precarity” (Gebhardt 2010:238), thus being able to position it within the greater context of “precarity literature”. *Nanika aru*, described by Ichikawa Makoto as a novel in which Kirino turns to “historical fact consumed as fiction” (Ichikawa 2011:3), takes the novelist Hayashi Fumiko as its protagonist and fictionalizes her (poorly documented) time as an army correspondent in Java and Borneo. Even in the case of a famous novelist like Hayashi Fumiko, Kirino is able to continue her lineage of the “less privileged” and outsiders, as Hayashi was apparently a writer with a problematic reputation in the literary circles. For instance, Sekikawa and Kirino discuss Kawabata Yasunari's speech on Hayashi's funeral¹², or a gossip about Hayashi urinating by the roadside in Ginza, which spread in the literary circles (Sekikawa/Kirino 2010). It could also be said that a legacy of Hayashi's writing can be assessed in Kirino's body of work, as both prominently feature female protagonists leading unstable or ‘precarious’ lives – *Ukigumo* (“Floating Clouds”, 1951; eng. 2006) or the autobiographical *Hōrōki* (“Diary of a Vagabond”, 1930) might be cited as the best-known examples among Hayashi's works.

Although Kirino says she doesn't like to take up social issues in her novels, she adds that she has no choice but to deal with them when writing about young people, such as in the case of *Metabora* (Satō/Kirino 2009/2012:195). However, this is at odds with her own description of *OUT* as a novel which in its background represents issues of gender inequality, family problems, foreign workers and political establishment (PEN American Center 2007) and also her penchant for writing about the lower strata of society, where portrayal of social faults seems unavoidable. The socially informed dimension of her novels also goes anything but unnoticed in the discourse on her work. Copeland remarks that *Tenshi ni misuterareta yoru* takes up the more “edgy” social issues of Japan in 1994 such as the rise of pornography

¹² Kawabata appealed to those present to forgive Hayashi, even if he is aware she did many “terrible things” (Pulvers 2012).

and homosexuality (Copeland 2004:250), also pointing out its significant timing, as this was the time of many feminist campaigns fighting against the booming pornography industry (Copeland 2004:252). Gebhardt calls *I'm sorry, mama* the definitive allegory for Japan as a “cold mother” and its protagonist Aiko as “precarity personified” (Gebhardt 2010:147) and argues for *Tamamoe!* as Kirino’s contribution to the actual discourse on seniority in Japan (Gebhardt 2007a:461).

Much of how Japanese society at large works becomes manifest in Kirino's gender relationships, which is also the point raised in her discussion of *Joshinki* (“The Goddess Chronicle”, 2008) with the political scientist Hara Takeshi. Hara understands *Joshinki* as a work in which the author closely approaches the depths of (Japanese) monarchy without discussing Japan’s constitution or political history (Hara/Kirino 2009/2012:239). He also stresses that although *Joshinki*, at first glance, is connected to Japanese mythology and unrelated to the present, it raises questions he couldn't avoid when thinking about the symbolic monarchy of Japan and which haven't been taken up so far (Hara/Kirino 2009/2012:244). Kirino, however, says that her fictional story was sparked by the theme of women's cruelty in the mythological stories, which she believes to be “unparalleled” in the world; she thus states that it wasn't her intention to get “to the root” of Japanese monarchy (Hara/Kirino 2009/2012:240-241).

Mochizuki's description of *Joshinki* as a work “reviving women's long-hidden voices through myth” (Mochizuki 2010:59) might speak for lack of change in women's underprivileged position in society, a theme running through the majority of Kirino's works. The prime example of this theme would be *Gurotesuku*, where its protagonists aren't only victims of patriarchal society in the sense of being oppressed by men, but also within women themselves; in this case, Kirino speaks of a “disparate society (*kakusa shakai*) within women” (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:133). In a much less discussed example, one of the characters in *Kōgen*, a former “idol” singer-turned-actress Inoue Sawa, is looked down upon as a third-rate actress, shamed by her recent release of a nude photobook (its huge profitability notwithstanding). However, she appears to be much more professional and business-savvy than her co-star, the big-name “respectable” actor Takami Takashi – who is hiding an incestuous relationship with his half-sister himself. The fictionalized history of Kirino's grand-uncle in *Gyokuran* is complemented by the storyline of protagonist Yūko, in which she reflects on the recent trend among Japanese women to move abroad in order to pursue their dreams, only to return to Japan, therefore also making the novel grounded in social reality. One of her concerns with the novel has been the experiences her grand-uncle and these women might have made abroad; she asks whether they've been different after all despite the 70-year gap (Kirino 2005:378).

All that is not to say that Kirino doesn't reflect change in society when due: while saying the protagonist of *Tamamoe!* was modeled after her mother, she also claims that she doesn't think such story would be possible in her generation, suggesting that the “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*) are becoming a thing of the past (Shigematsu/Kirino 2009/2012:95). The problem seems to lie within the privileged male position, as the writer Shigematsu Kiyoshi stresses in the same interview, saying that although women's consciousness changes from generation to generation, the way the husband in *Tamamoe!* is portrayed would apply to his own generation as well; he states the opinion that men still return to “the good old age of paternity” of their fathers (Shigematsu/Kirino 2009/2012:95-96). Kirino also seems eager to communicate the zeitgeist of present Japan, which she sees as a critical time: she likens the post-3/11 experience and the feelings it brings about to Shimaō Toshio's emotional state expressed in *Shi no toge* – which, in his case, is brought about by Japan's war defeat – saying she wants to comfort this unease (*iwakan*) by writing (Shiraishi 2011).

Kirino also offers glimpses into what she perceives as a possible function of her literature. In a 2007 interview with Yū Miri, she states that up until a while ago, she was writing about things “more horrible than the horrible reality” (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:146) because she thought reading her novels might give hope to people who had terrible things happen to them. That thought has since transformed into thinking that writing is but a “play”, as she has become aware that there are things happening in the world she couldn't even imagine. She calls the scope of literature “limited” and states that while she doesn't mind working within that limited scope, she has come to think she should stop trying to write something “overcoming reality”, as there are realities unknown to her (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:146-147). On another occasion, Kirino supposes that what society needs in times of profound change and economic crisis was more “supermarket novels” (*sūpā shōsetsu*); she also muses about literature probably “not having any sense anymore” (Hoshino/Kirino 2009/2012:176), suggesting a shift in the social function of literature in general. Thus, by writing, she says she wants people to “wake up”; however, she does not want to tell them what to do as she doesn't consider herself a writer of bildungsromans (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2012:235). Her “unwillingness” to provide concrete solutions to the social ills she describes, might be best expressed in her statement that words are different in meaning for everybody – and therefore, she ultimately doesn't trust them (Yū/Kirino 2009/2012:137).

3. Writing a better world: utopian literature

Since Kirino Natsuo operates explicitly with the terms of “utopia” and “dystopia” in *Poritikon* (to give an example, the terms feature as antipodes in blurbs on the covers of both volumes of its hardcover version), it is to be expected that the novel will bear some kind of relationship with the utopian literary tradition. It is therefore necessary that the terms of “utopia” and “dystopia” (or “anti-utopia”) be defined, explained and their literary traditions traced, thus providing the basis for reading the utopian elements in *Poritikon*.

The coining of the term “utopia” is famously credited to Thomas More and his work *Utopia* (1516), meaning “no place”, yet this in itself is a pun on the Greek word “eutopia” (“good place”). What is generally considered its opposite, “dystopia”, would then mean a “bad place”. A primary characteristic of a utopia is therefore its setting, a non-existent place, *topos* (Sargent 1994:4). Beyond that, defining these terms – or rather what exactly they entail – is less simple than it may first seem. Tom Moylan dedicates a good part of his treatise *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) to demarcate lines between the terms utopia, anti-utopia and dystopia, throwing a number of other “utopian varieties” into the mix here and there, apparently with no absolute results. Christopher Ferns states already in the second paragraph of the preface to his *Narrating Utopia* (1999) that “utopia itself, unsurprisingly, exhibits an enormous range of configurations” (Ferns 1999:ix). He then elaborates on this statement in more concrete terms, stating that utopia embodies social and political alternatives to the society of the writer’s times, and is affected by historical circumstances (at a given time and place), gender and class backgrounds or psychological factors of the writer (ibid.). As the possibly single thing scholars studying utopia agree upon, Krishan Kumar (1987) names the fact that (fictional) utopian societies are perfected social orders – societies which managed to solve all problems known to humankind, and which know no need for change, which thus, consequently, becomes a threat (Kumar 1987:48). The aspect of perfection, however, is one that Sargent (1994) suggests should be avoided in defining utopias, arguing that there are very few of so-called “eutopias” (“good places”) which the authors conceive of as perfect; ‘real eutopias’ thus rather constitute an exception than the norm. He also points out the close ties between perfection and force, and by extension a close link to totalitarianism (Sargent 1994:9).

Other scholars come up with more definite descriptions of what utopia, or utopian fiction, is. Somewhat tautological is Gary Saul Morson's statement that a literary work can only be considered utopian if it was written in the tradition of previous utopian literary works, depicts an ideal society and

advocates its realization (Morson 1981:72, cited in Ferns 1999:13). Darko Suvin describes utopia as a construction of a “quasi-human” community with more perfect sociopolitical institutions, norms and individual relationships than is the case in the writer's society, with this construction stemming from the author's estrangement from that (real) society (Suvin 1979:49). In a final example, French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy remarks that utopia is always fashioning itself as a representation of something impliedly unreal (Nancy 2011:Locations 315-317). This representation is desirable, but by the same token also unrealizable – although still worth striving for in light of an unsatisfactory reality (Nancy 2011:Locations 340-343). As a second trait, utopia must represent a world – a totality of existence and meaning – and represent that totality as such (Nancy 2011:Locations 376-379). Importantly, Nancy claims that no utopia can be relevant for only a part of humanity, that utopias don't point toward other worlds or realities, but strive to realize this world “in itself and by itself” (Nancy 2011:Location 414-417).

The other, darker end of the utopian spectrum is a hotly contested issue in utopian scholarship, with “dystopia” and “anti-utopia” being far from synonymous, though they are still often used interchangeably, such as in Krishan Kumar's extensive study *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Significantly, he points out a dialectic relationship between the two, calling them “antithetical yet interdependent”, yet in an unsymmetrical, parasitical relationship – with “anti-utopia” being a copy of utopia colored black (Kumar 1987:100). Christopher Ferns also uses the terms “dystopia” and “anti-utopia” as synonyms, describing their function as parodying or subverting the traditional utopian model in order to satirize and warn against dangers present in contemporary society (Ferns 1999:15). On the contrary, Lyman Tower Sargent provides an elaborate differentiation of the utopian spectrum:

Utopianism – social dreaming.

Utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.

Eutopia or positive utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.

Dystopia or negative utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.

Utopian satire – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.

Anti-utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space

that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.

Critical utopia – a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre. (Sargent 1994:9)

Moylan describes eutopia as a ‘general sibling’ of dystopia, and anti-utopia as its nemesis, while understanding dystopias to be open textual forms negotiating a position *between* utopia and anti-utopia; dystopia crosses over into anti-utopia when no alternative to the fictional reality is being presented. In this respect, he calls dystopias “progressively inclined texts” in their refusal of accepting the status quo and exploring positive possibilities (Moylan 2000:xiii). Bobby Newman (1993), following other critics of utopian and dystopian literature such as J.C. Davis, George Kateb, Krishan Kumar or Chad Walsh, identifies the criteria for classification of a literary work as dystopian as follows:

“(…) (a) suspicion of scientific social planning, (b) the unhappiness of the characters portrayed, (c) suspicion of sources of control of behavior outside the individual, (d) violation of a presumed inherent need to struggle, and (e) suspicion of behavioral methods of governance. (…)” (Newman 1993:167)

What this shows is that there might be no satisfactory and universal definition of what utopia, or for that matter all of its derived varieties (dystopia, anti-utopia etc.) is, not least because works of utopian literature are (that much can be asserted) strongly defined by their social, cultural and political contexts, as well as their writers' lived realities. An attempt to decide on one simple definition would not provide enough understanding for what the various forms of utopia can mean; a look into narrative patterns of utopian (and dystopian or anti-utopian) literature, as well as its possible functions, agendas and links to real societies might therefore shed more light on the subject.

3.1 The grand scheme: utopian narratives

Although the history of utopia as a literary genre spans centuries, one of the points its scholars tend to agree upon is how little its underlying narrative principles (in the case of a ‘classic’ utopia) have changed. For his part, Kumar even goes further back in history than More's *Utopia* and raises the question whether all utopias of the past two and a half thousand years really are anything more than footnotes to Plato's

Republic, claiming that all its characteristic features such as “reign of reason” in a threefold hierarchy, elevation of public over private life or communalism of property are to be found in the majority of later utopian works (Kumar 1987:2). A similar point is made by Bobby Newman, following George Kateb, when he identifies the form of a dialogue as primary means of utopian and dystopian novels to present their ideas. This dialogue is accompanied by a verbal clash between a proponent and a dissident and revolves around ideas of struggle, challenge and adversity and the overcoming of these (Newman 1993:170). Northrop Frye (1965) sees Plato and More as paradigmatic for later utopias in their emphasis on the legal structure of the societies they create, giving rise to utopias with close relation to social or political theory as opposed to science fiction (Frye 1965:325-326).

Frye also points out that a frequent narrative device which in fact is often believed to be the classic framing of a utopian narrative. The protagonist (mostly a first-person narrator) enters the utopia and receives a tour of it by a guide, with whom they also enter the aforementioned dialogue – the protagonist either asks questions or poses problems, while the guide answers (Frye 1965:324). He further generalizes that the utopian narrative presents a society “governed by ritual habit, or prescribed social behavior, which is explained rationally” (Frye 1965:325). An interesting paradox thus arises in many utopias presented as isolated so as to protect them from the corrupted outside world, yet with the visitor being able to penetrate this barrier only to witness the wonders of the respective perfect society, and then return back to be able to spread his or her message (Ferns 1999:2-3). The limits of this traditional narrative model become obvious with its prolonged preservation. Here, Ferns draws a parallel with the end of the age of exploration, due to which the figure of the traveler is replaced by that of the tourist visiting not the unknown, but rather the exotic, returning from the journey with “holiday snaps” of little relevance. He also states that the traditional “traveler's tale” format – appearing linear, episodic and lacking in drama – becomes obsolete in the age of the novel. Recent utopian writers try to account for this by supplementing the works with individual characterizations or love interests, which are typical for the novel format (Ferns 1999:19-20). On the other hand, Kumar argues that it is precisely this process that shows utopia is closer to the novel than any other genre, although not the prototypical novel of the nineteenth century (Kumar 1987:25). In less concrete terms, the utopian narrative structure could also be assessed as an “abstraction of life or society, a game between virtues and vices” (Stites 1989:14), beginning with an ideal person and constructing his or her environment as “a game board for the optimal development (winning at life) of this person” (ibid.).

Utopian settings, too, exhibit characteristics that have already been well examined. Again, Kumar

traces the fundamental concept of an unknown (or exotic) place as the utopian stage back to Ancient Greece, where it had been a common practice in literature to express criticism or satire through the customs and institutions of distant lands which did not even necessarily have to be real. This practice would then experience a revival in the time of European voyages, made more attractive with a potential for conquest (Kumar 1987:23). He also sees the typical setting of a city as one profoundly influenced by the ideal Hellenic city and, again, Plato's *Republic*, citing H. G. Wells four centuries later as an example for the persistence of this ideal (Kumar 1987:5). It is also the “orderly city” and a city-dominated society which Frye considers to be a primary vision of utopia, serving to contrast the writer's own society with the more desirable, fictional one – citing More's *Utopia* and its scenes of England in disorder, set against his construction of Utopia, as an example (Frye 1965:325). Other characteristics of this society are its stasis, not allowing for any change in its (perfect) structure (Frye 1965:329), and a dominant role of the state over the individual, marked by communal property and minimization of individual life, leisure, privacy and freedom of movement; utopia describes a unified society, not individual existences (Frye 1965:335). And once more, this stasis can well bring about another paradox, present for instance again in Wells (and before him, in works of the Renaissance) – an absence of any discussion on the utopia's genesis, a striking omission in a time of profound social transformation (Ferns 1999:98). Kumar differentiates between Plato's and More's utopian visions (both communist societies) as the former being aristocratic, the latter egalitarian, with this egalitarianism finding its way into later utopias. Coupled with this, the emphasis on manual labor as common duty and an honorable activity is often replicated (Kumar 1987:26-27). Until the end of the eighteenth century, he detects a pattern of simple social orders with citizens of few needs, agrarian societies of peasants and artisans, allowing fully for their development. Any luxury beyond these simple needs is understood to be corrupting (Kumar 1987:46). This egalitarianism can also acquire shades of exclusivity and elitism, as with Wells or Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887), where the society is entirely middle-class and in agreement with a strong government concerning its treatment of undesirable elements of this society. Here, poverty and oppression are to be disposed of because they offend the cultured middle class, and society's members should be made equal by eliminating society's undesirable elements (Ferns 1999:90).

Another persistent pattern within literary utopias concerns the gender roles of its inhabitants, a point brought up by Ferns. Firstly, the protagonists of utopian literature are almost uniformly male (Ferns 1999:13), and for all their questioning of society's fundamental institutions, classic utopias never seem to question patriarchal orders, in which Ferns also sees a parallel to the narratives of discovery and their

gendering of unknown (and by extension, dominated) territory as female (Ferns 1999:64). This role assignment, however, continues well beyond the age of discovery; constructions of “natural femininity” are still to be found in Aldous Huxley (*Island*, 1962), Willam Morris (*News from Nowhere*, 1890) or Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward*, 1887). Ferns therefore raises the question whether utopian narratives don't serve “a specifically male fantasy of establishing a familiar security” (Ferns 1999:174).

A need for a fundamental rethinking of utopian narratives obviously arose already a long time ago. Frye states that “new utopias” would have to adapt to an increasingly liquid state of society as opposed to “fixed locations of life”, and that “modern utopias” are already signified by the “uniform pattern of civilization spread over the whole globe” (Frye 1965:346-347). Kumar puts some emphasis on the non-linear development in the revival of utopian writing over the course of the 19th century, influenced by the emergence of new literary techniques (informed, for instance, by impressionism), new genres (science fiction) and new technologies (photography, film); he also explains this with utopia's flexibility in purpose and content as illustrated by works of Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1921) and Huxley (*Brave New World*, 1932) (Kumar 1987:65-66). Yet for Laurence Davis, the “dynamic” utopias of the late 19th and early 20th century (citing Bellamy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Wells as examples) are unconvincing in that they only project larger or purer versions of their present societies into the future. Davis calls this a “content-driven stasis” matched by the narrative stasis of utopian literature itself; at the same time, he finds the promise of a final resolution “disturbing” (Davis 2011:Location 3359-3363).

3.1.1 Enlightened dreams: “new utopias” of the 20th century

It is only in the latter part of 20th century that truly reconceptualized utopias start to emerge. Ferns recognizes an acknowledgment of the traditional utopian conception as a failed project and a leaning towards starting anew; following Angelika Bammer, he also brings up the tendency of many authors to move away from utopia as a total system, with recent utopian writing offering (smaller) glimpses of utopia (Ferns 1999:8). Taking William Morris, Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy as exemplary libertarian writers, he also calls attention to their utopias, which are no longer based on static, centralized order. Instead, they opt for freedom (in an oppressive environment) and self-fulfillment as the ultimate goals in their narratives (Ferns 1999:15-16). Moylan detects a shift among central characters, too, in that the “visitor” is dispensed with in new utopias, which focus on the respective utopia's citizen or an outsider facing an existential political decision in order to preserve or develop this utopia (Moylan 2000:54-55).

The modern utopian writing also increasingly blurs lines and incorporates explicitly dystopian motives, as Kumar shows on the example of Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974); here, utopia is being questioned (and thus, its contemporary status is being reflected upon), and neither of its both contrasting settings could be considered as entirely utopian or dystopian (Kumar 1987:414-415). Tellingly, the novel is subtitled *An Ambiguous Utopia*. This blurring of lines, however, also raises the question of when utopian writing ceases to be utopian, a question also relevant in regard to *Poritikon* as a novel by Kirino Natsuo, an author who often chooses to employ genre patterns liberally or in a subversive manner. Indeed, Samuel R. Delany rejects the utopian label for his novel *Triton* (1976) (Ferns 1999:205). Instead, he subtitles it – in reference to both Le Guin and Michel Foucault – *An Ambiguous Heterotopia*.

Another significant turn for utopia in the second half of the latter 20th century was constituted by a raised ecological awareness in light of counter-cultural debates and, later, the 1973 oil crisis. Symptomatic for this variety of utopia, which Kumar dubs an “ecotopia” (also the title of a 1975 Ernest Callenbach novel), is its realistic, uncompromising and intense utopian vision in presenting ecological lifestyle as the most viable alternative for the future (Kumar 1987:405). Ecotopias don't shy away from technology, but rather advocate its ecological use and control (Kumar 1987:406), and Kumar sees their continuing influence (from the standpoint of the 1980s) in the “modification of the socialist utopia” (Kumar 1987:415).

In a discussion about the reconceptualization of utopian writing in the 20th century, the role of women writers is impossible to ignore. This, of course, is striking, since the canonical, classical utopian works have been written by men, with the resulting problematic gender perspectives mentioned above (3.1). Yet, it is not only gender that is being taken up by these feminist writers – two of the three novels discussed by Chan (2006) deal with issues of race and racial identity, until then a topic conspicuously absent from utopian writing, have been written by women: *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You* (Dorothy Bryant, 1975), *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Marge Piercy, 1976), and Delany's *Triton* (Chan 2006:466). Moylan points out the expansive tendency in “feminist” (he uses the term in brackets) utopian writing, as it incorporates dimensions of socialism, communism, anarchism, ecological awareness, and leftist or libertarian thought (Moylan 2000:80). He also describes the young people, especially young adolescent women, presented as “leading models for the radical new subjectivity explored in these novels” (Moylan 2000:81). In his own treatment of feminist utopian writing, Ferns is more critical of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978) because, according to him, they simply reverse utopian tropes – and thus reproduce their problematic features – and seem to

accept the notion of “essential femininity” present in their own society (Ferns 1999:199). In general, though, he concludes that a different gender perspective has the potential to change the narrative paradigms of utopia (Ferns 1999:175).

3.1.2 Developing a negative: dystopian narratives

As should already be clear from the above discussion on definitions of utopia and the various terms within the “utopian spectrum”, it is problematic to consider dystopia and utopia as simple binaries. In fact, it is legitimate to look at both concepts as two viewpoints of the same thing. Ferns even identifies the relationship between utopia and dystopia as a dialectical one, claiming that there were always contradictions, conflicting assumptions and incompatible agendas present in all literary utopias, no matter how complete and perfect (Ferns 1999:26).

For Tom Moylan, a crucial narrative element of a dystopian text is its opening *in medias res*, presenting the society's structure and operation, then zooming in on one of its subjects, establishing an everyday quality to the setting. During the course of the narrative, this protagonist gains insight into the true nature of things and the relationship between the individual and the system. The texts then generally branch out into two possibilities – either the subject is crushed by the system, or he/she manages to find allies and starts an opposition against it. In the latter case, even a defeat does not conclude the narrative on a resigned note – it rather shows hope for the future due to the inspirational nature of this oppositional party (Moylan 2000:xiii). The dystopian narrative therefore forgoes the journey motif of the classical utopia, instead opting for a strategy of immersion, and is marked by a progression from a state of apparent contentment to alienation, and from awareness to action that either does or does not manage to make a change in the fictional society (Moylan 2000:148).

Ferns states that the narrative pattern of resistance is reasserting traditional and individual values, which is accompanied by the displacement of political resistance into the sphere of sexuality (Ferns 1999:125). Secrecy and privacy become strategies of defense in a surveillance state, with old-fashioned clothing, obsolete artifacts and “anachronistic” sexual behavior offering only a symbolic resistance, as realistically, an individual's opposition is futile within the context of a powerful state (Ferns 1999:126). Also, the protagonists – whose perspective mediates the dystopian world to the reader – generally belong to an underprivileged social class or fraction, and so are implicitly denied the (utopian) “perfection” (Suvin 1998:170, cited in Moylan 2000:136). Where the protagonist does manage to find a sense of

freedom and release from the tight grip of the dystopian society is usually a pastoral landscape beyond the territory of this society (as can be seen in *We, Brave New World* or *1984*); these pastoral scenes, of course, serve as a counterpoint to the urban emphasis of dystopia, with the organic character of this landscape starkly contrasting with the dystopia's artifice (Ferns 1999:120-121).

As Tom Moylan follows a differentiated approach to the terms “anti-utopia” and “dystopia”, he consequently states the opinion that the formal properties of the “anti-utopia” (as defined by Irving Howe) are worth considering in an inquest for recurring narrative patterns of dystopian (or anti-utopian) texts. Howe also suggests a different reading of each anti-utopian text, due to their own premises which are distinctive from those of the traditional novel. The characteristics of anti-utopia are presented by him as follows:

1. It posits a “flaw” in the perfection of the perfect. ...
2. It must be in the grip of an idea at once dramatically simple and historically complex: an idea that has become a commanding passion. ...
3. It must be clever in the management of its substantiating detail. ...
4. It must strain our sense of the probable while not violating our attachment to the plausible. ...
5. In presenting the nightmare of history undone, it must depend on the ability of its readers to engage in an act of historical recollection. (Howe 1962:15-16, cited in Moylan 2000:125)

What, then, differentiates the dystopian from the utopian society – if anything? Both are based on stability and stasis, with change standing for a distinct threat. Therefore, making the past disappear becomes a classic dystopian trope – from the standpoint of the present, past makes for an undeniable proof that change at large is possible, and it must therefore be erased (Ferns 1999:119). The risk this poses on a narrative level – rendering the utopia undesirable – is endorsing values of the fictional past (itself referring to an actual, non-fictional present), in that the return to “the world as it is now” becomes the goal. The utopian narrative is thus merely reversed in terms of its time structure, beginning in the future and returning to the past (Ferns 1999:128).

Both utopian and dystopian societies operate with the suppression of individual identities, only dystopias tend to make this more explicit, with this suppression apparently acting in the interests of stability, security and conformity. Ferns traces this back to the utopian ideal of a “womb-like security”, drawing a further parallel between the two (Ferns 1999:14). The motherly motif is further present in utopia as an “underlying fantasy of the patriarchal appropriation of the powers of the mother”, rewritten in utopia as a “dream of the son's unsuccessful rebellion against the father” (Ferns 1999:126).

This overlapping, dialectic relationship between utopia and dystopia is well summed up by Kumar: there are those who fear that utopia can actually be attained, and that it will be a nightmare. Reaching an ultimate achievement (e.g., a perfect society) would also render any more striving meaningless and thus deny an essential part of the human spirit (Kumar 1987:102). In its alternative designs of society, utopia and dystopia – two sides of the same coin – remain closely bound to the realities of their writers, as well as those of their readers. With shifts in these realities, it is to be expected that the function and potential of utopia would shift as well – the relatively recent emergence of dystopia as a distinct genre only supporting such thesis.

3.2 Functions of utopia

Utopian and dystopian texts are clearly fraught with ambiguities, and it should be expected that these ambiguities would manifest themselves in their structure, or influence how a utopian text functions beyond its own diegesis. The links between utopias and socio-political realities bring up a number of questions: whether they are meant to be didactic and aiming for readers' positive responses to the vision presented, whether they should stimulate hopes, desires and beliefs for new possibilities, or whether they aim to stir up social change, or rather reinforce the status quo by means of “diversion” (Ferns 1999:x). Equally important is a consideration of what is not being addressed, what of the current reality is being preserved, and in how far traditional narrative patterns (as discussed in 3.1) are being reproduced (Ferns 1999:26). Ferns also brings up two fundamental arguments concerning this relation, which might also be described as one of non-fiction and fiction. Firstly, no matter how flawless the respective literary utopia, and no matter how critical the writer might be of his or her own society, the relation remains crucial within all utopian fiction (Ferns 1999:3). Secondly (citing “libertarian visions”, as well as “separatist utopias” as examples), conflict seems to be inherent within this relation (Ferns 1999:202). Alexandre Franco de Sá summarizes this correspondence as follows: What binds utopia to reality is its “intrinsic allusion to what 'should be'” as an attempt to overcome it rather than as an “instantly verifiable reality” (de Sá 2011:Locations 757-762).

Closely bound to the concept of society is that of ideology, which proves central for the discourse on utopia. Moylan states that not only is utopia always immersed in ideology, it is always empowered by it (Moylan 2000:91). Ferns, on the other hand, calls to attention that narrative forms are never free from ideological links, and points out that these links or ideological implications may well be at odds with the

nature of the utopian society itself (Ferns 1999:18). Other questionable issues concerning the binding of utopia to (dominant) ideologies are its tendency to depict static and authoritarian social orders, as well as the monologic nature of the supposed dialogue about the respective utopia (Ferns 1999:100-101). The question of ideology is, however, not limited to utopias and should therefore not be viewed as exclusively their problem. This is what Douglas Kellner points out when he states that most cultural artifacts contain a mixture of ideology and utopian elements. According to Kellner, ideologies have to possess a “relatively rational and attractive core” which contains “emancipatory promises and moments” (Kellner 2011:Locations 2325-2327). Following Marx and Engels, Moylan stresses that no work can escape its own cultural and ideological horizons, and therefore, “the 'true vocation' of Utopia” lies within its production rather than the product itself” (Moylan 2000:92).

In a unified and interconnected space of today's world, de Sá pins down the change in utopian thinking to its temporal dimension and projections into future (de Sá 2011:Locations 836-842). The problem, then, arises in the self-perception of modern societies (which he describes as “uchronic”) as existing in the “final stage of development of political institutions”, with the absence of a future and an assumption of the indefinite continuation of the status quo being their defining characteristics (de Sá 2011:Locations 986-992). For Josep Ramoneda, the “root of the malaise of the postmodern urban culture” is the absence of meaning tying the subject to a collective cultural meaning, defining the “new utopia” as “living without meaning” (Ramoneda 2011:Locations 3194-3197). As a consequence, politics disappears as a space of shared meaning, democratic politics are replaced by the corporate state with financial companies as the new rulers, and citizens are reduced to consumers (Ramoneda 2011:Locations 3198-3202). Nonetheless, this is not to say that the present political sphere is completely lacking utopian moments and projects. The European Union, which is presumably rooted in a common cultural heritage and is born out of the idea of a shared European destiny is raised as an example here (Marder/Vieira 2011b:1271-1272), as well as the resurgence of “hope” as part of a political discourse in the Obama era (Kellner 2011:2523-2525).

3.2.1 Involving the reader: critical potential of utopia

Critical potential is inherent to utopia, but as shown above (3.2), the criticism is not always successful or completely convincing. The specific visions of the classic utopian model may well endow it with a “prescriptive quality”, limiting the readers’ space for imagination (Ferns 1999:4), and alternatives which

are nevertheless dogmatic (Ferns 1999:24). As already noted, the apparently dialogic structure does not necessarily seek to invite discussion on the part of the reader, and some of the most radical utopias end up reinscribing dominant ideological values of the writers' societies (Ferns 1999:13). All this notwithstanding, the question of writer's intent and reader's interpretation – and their congruence – becomes a crucial factor. A good example is B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), widely regarded as a dystopian novel (due to its rather radical construction of a society based on behavioral analysis), but in fact intended to be a utopia (Newman 1993:167). An argument Bobby Newman makes in *Walden Two's* defense is that utopianism itself would be pointless without determinism, and that the novel only forgoes the “distractions” of other utopian novels (Newman 1993:173); it is interesting, then, that what could be perceived as a utopia in a pure form would invite as much criticism and disturbance.

This case only underlines the intertwining of utopia and dystopia, the latter only holding more critical promise. Moylan even claims that “every dystopian narrative engages in an aesthetic/epistemological encounter with its historical conjuncture” (Moylan 2000:180). Ferns sees dystopias as being more effective in that the monologic element of utopia is absent, the difference between the actual and the fictional is not spelled out, and the uncritical figure of an outside narrator or visitor is dispensed with. In trusting the reader's intelligence, then, dystopian fiction in fact manages more effectively to produce agreement with the writer's intent (Ferns 1999:110-111). In dystopian texts, the root problem is not easily identifiable with a single policy or practice, and therefore, the dystopian predicament cannot be easily fixed. The causes of evil are presented as systemic, and the narratives invite readers' interrogation with their own realities (Moylan 2000:xii). Yet Ferns is more wary of this aspect than Moylan, pointing out that this freedom of judgment is determined by the (writer's) comparative setting up of the real and the dystopian world. This form of satire is essentially already present in traditional utopias in which positive aspects of the utopian world are mirrored by the negative ones in the real world, the only difference being that the dystopian mode “works better” (Ferns 1999:110). Again, Moylan differentiates between the terms “anti-utopia” and “dystopia”, the difference in this case constituted by dystopia's questioning whether correct or progressive choices can be made, rather than condemning such possibility (Moylan 2000:135). An anti-utopian text challenges utopianism, thus interrogating the limits of utopia as well as the existing society (Moylan 2000:138), but it does not simply work as a negation of utopia, rather offering a “critical complement to the ordering function of utopian and dystopian logics” (Moylan 2000:129).

The problematic nature of utopia's critical nature is addressed by the authors of the utopian revival

which experienced its prime in the 1970s, and whose works Tom Moylan (1986) tellingly dubs “critical utopias”. He argues that an awareness of traditional utopia's limitations become a central concern of these texts, that social change is highlighted through the conflict of the ordinary and utopian societies, and that through portrayal of difference and imperfection within the utopias themselves, the proposed alternatives are endowed with a more dynamic quality (Moylan 1986:10-11). The “open and self-reflexive operations” (Moylan 1986:198) within the critical utopian texts themselves displace them from “petrified systematizing as well as its denial” (ibid.), and by extension also from the affirmative culture. Moylan argues that in this way, the texts manage to transport their critical utopian impulse as their chief message (ibid.). He also suggests that in their openness and rejection of traditional utopian form, these texts address the “deep tensions within the political unconscious of the present moment” (Moylan 1986:210), and by refusing to conform to their own (literary) traditions, they can contribute to current political opposition as “meaningful proto-political acts” (Moylan 1986:211). The reader's critical thinking is also stimulated by presenting a possibility rather than an ideal, and by emphasizing a sense of process, central to the body of work in this new wave of utopian writing (Ferns 1999:x).

Working with concepts of “positioning” (the text's addressing of the readers and their perspective in regard to the fictional society) and “closure” (return to harmony and stability) (Fitting 1987:29), Peter Fitting compares four utopian novels of the 1970s (*Triton*, *The Dispossessed*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, already mentioned above, and *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ [1975]) with traditional, canonized works such as More's *Utopia* or Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. In these new utopias, readers are no longer positioned as addressees of a persuasive philosophic dialogue; the texts rather aim for an identification with (one of) the fictional characters and an emotional, as well as intellectual investment on the readers' part (Fitting 1987:30). Closure – a literary device to reinscribe the reader within the dominant order (Fitting 1987:33) – is avoided by presenting imperfect systems, but also by denying readers a closure on a narrative level (Fitting 1987:36). It seems, then, that problematic points of utopian fiction have been addressed successfully on an aesthetic level – the question of their effectiveness further relying on the readership they would manage or fail to reach.

3.2.2 But does it work? Utopia's relevance

In examinations of utopia's relevance in today's world, most scholars arrive at pessimistic conclusions, or at least acknowledge its limited resonance and potential to arouse discussion. Kumar describes the pronouncement of utopia as dead as “commonplace” in the twentieth century (Kumar 1987:380), while Ferns also questions the effectiveness of the newer utopian writing in its challenge to the dominant ideology (Ferns 1999:234). But in fact, this does not seem to be an exclusively recent phenomenon. Utopian visions would often absorb their subversive impulse of political opposition in relegating it to an unattainable “other”, and great utopias in fiction would generate little social change (Moynan 1986:5). Also, because their didactic aspiration is vastly overtaking the literary one, few utopias would be remembered as great works of literature (Kumar 1987:25) and inspire future generations by their messages. Kumar also sees the shift of novelistic writing away from “great panoramic social novels” such as those of Balzac or Tolstoy and a retreat to private worlds and focus on psychology rather than sociology as one cause of the diminishing of utopian writing (Kumar 1987:421-422).

By addressing very specific issues and targeting specific audiences (such as science fiction fans), recent utopias also move away from pointing to central principles in contemporary developments (Kumar 1987:422). Kumar also stresses the case of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* as exemplary for new utopian writing – while he claims it to be the best of “ecotopias”, suggesting contemplation on the part of the reader rather than endorsing a new order, it would nevertheless hardly be able to surpass its “literary ghetto” as a science fiction novel (Kumar 1987:420). Utopia, then, is no longer able to speak to society as a whole, and could only thrive in social theory or in practice, such as in the form of cults or communes (ibid.). For Ferns, the new role of utopia consists of stimulating and educating desire, rather than offering a full-fledged alternative to contemporary society (Ferns 1999:231). He also observes the short lifespan of this new utopian wave, with more academic writing on this subject being published than the works themselves (Ferns 1999:235). On the other hand, dystopian novels such as *1984* or *Brave New World* would go on to enjoy the status of relevant literary works. Dystopia would even permeate literature not explicitly envisioned as such and would be embraced by high literary culture – here, Kumar makes a case for William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *The Inheritors* (1955) as recalling “early Darwinian Wells” (Kumar 1987:404).

Obviously, utopia needs to be thought of differently in contemporary society. One alternative is provided by Laurence Davis and his concept of “grounded utopias”. As opposed to a “transcendent

utopia” (based on perfection in an impossible future), grounded utopias present possibilities of better living latent in the present, thus offering a potential of shaping social practices (Davis 2011:Locations 3510-3517). When presented as literature (examples being Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* [1993] and Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* [1985]), they aim to engage readers in a dialogue between what is and what should (or could) be and thus evade the pitfall of being just escapist fantasies (a point already taken up with “critical utopias”), and are often inspired by actual activism. Literary works are, however, not the only mode in which grounded utopias find expression. It is also formulated in a plethora of cultural practices, experiments with alternative lifestyles or in education. The utopian element is expressed in the “stubborn” maintenance of a lifestyle or practice at odds with global capitalism, and thus offers proof that “another world is possible” even in a socio-political climate where no alternative to market-driven corporate globalization is generally thinkable (Davis 2011:Locations 3530-3552). Importantly, Davis’ concept may well illustrate the thesis that utopia is a much more relevant concept in contemporary social thought and practice than in literature.

3.3 Utopia in Japan

All of the above inquiry into the discourse on utopia reveals, without a doubt, one thing: that utopia is a concept with an overwhelmingly Western bias. No other territories than Europe or America are ever considered, and given the cultural foundation on which utopia and all of its varieties are built, it might even seem exclusive to these territories. In this respect, Krishan Kumar adopts an explicitly exclusive stance when he claims that modern utopia – that is, utopia with roots in the Renaissance – is the *only* utopia, in that it inherits Christian forms and themes and transforms them into philosophy (Kumar 1987:3); the question of religion is central for Kumar, and he argues that a “religious underpinning” is indispensable if a respective utopia is to arouse a mass response (Kumar 1987:421). On another occasion, he calls utopia a “modern European novelty” (Kumar 1987:24). However, it is precisely this position which Sargent criticizes, reminding that every culture has produced body utopias (as opposed to city utopias) and that there are city utopias and utopian traditions outside of the Christian West (Sargent 1994:19). He also suggests to consider non-Western city utopias before More, which have existed in China and India; if monasticism is to be included as a form of intentional community, then both types of utopian literature (body and city utopias) and this type of intentional society actually do exist outside of Western civilization (Sargent 1994:20). Another important point to mention in a discussion about non-

Western utopian tradition is the fact that scholarship on this subject is scarce (Sargent 1994:19), extremely so when compared to its Western counterpart.

It also becomes clear that utopian tradition in Japan – or the roots of Japanese utopian literature – needs to be thought of in different dimensions. Moichi (1999) defines an absence of a conflict between the real and unreal, typical of Western utopias, as a prime characteristic of their Japanese siblings. It is Nuita (1971), however, who attempts to trace the difference in Japanese utopia back to ancient times, coming up with three contrasting characteristics of utopia in Japan and the West: the relationship of humans to nature, the pursuit of freedom and the aesthetics of symmetry. These three characteristics are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Following the etymological origin of the word “civilization”, Nuita concludes that civilization is an art of constructing cities – and that a fundamental feature of utopian thinking is the modification of nature by man. In this respect, nature cannot, by definition, be utopian. Yet nature permeates Japanese life, even in modern times, and has a fixed place in Japanese spirituality. A confrontation between “man and nature”, so substantial to the Western utopian thought, is absent. Nuita traces this cultural mindset further back to the classical Japanese *waka* poetry, also pointing out that the “consciousness” of original sin is missing in Japan, as opposed to the West. Even a mythological basis of utopian thought does not apply to Japanese culture, since the oldest collection of myths in the *Kojiki* (ca. 712 A.D.) has a pronounced political function, and so differs from Western mythologies (Nuita 1971:18-19).

The second contrasting characteristic is the theme of human liberation and freedom, which – in the case of Western utopias – is also rooted in religion, but is taken up by a number of theories as well. Interestingly, Nuita also acknowledges the possibility to equate religion with utopia, although in a somewhat esoteric line of argument, in claiming both to be “the highest manifestations of the energy of consciousness as it (consciousness) pursues life” (Nuita 1971:26). Yet again, the concept of free will has different implications in Japanese culture, and Nuita argues that solitude (central to utopias in general) arises from the nature of everyday life in Japan, as opposed to it being rooted in “human nature”, which would be the case in Western thought. Therefore, if Japanese satires and political novels pursue social criticism (at least up until the writing of his article) and seek improvements in society, these are usually bound to ordinary, everyday life (Nuita 1971:27-28).

The third characteristic – that of symmetry – is actually related to the first, the concern with nature. Nuita observes that typical Western utopias have symmetrical shapes, and these imply both the conquest of nature and the design of a new social order. Utopian spirit of equality is also expressed through these

symmetric aesthetics (Nuita 1971:28). For the case of Japan, Nuita argues that harmony is expressed through pictorial rather than geometrical symmetry, citing Japanese graphic arts as an example, as well as ancient urban planning – the exception, Kyōto, having been modeled after the Chinese city of Ch'ang-an (Nuita 1971:29).

3.3.1 Tracing the roots: A history of Japanese utopianism

The oldest Japanese literary work with utopian elements which Nuita mentions is *Taketori monogatari* (*Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*) from the tenth century. The story concludes with a three-inch high girl raised by a bamboo cutter leaving to the moon – Nuita interprets an absence of self-projection to the moon (as another world) and a depiction of new life there as a significant point of difference to Western utopian patterns (Nuita 1971:20). He then makes a jump into the eighteenth century, where he gives two examples of works manifesting an “awareness of opposition between man and nature”: Andō Shōeki's *Shizen shin'eidō* (“The true way, according to nature”, 1775) and Hiraga Gennai's *Fūryū Shidōken den* (“The Romantic Biography of Shidōken”, 1763). Andō was critical of Japan's feudal system and he suggests an alternative social system in his work, one which puts strong emphasis on (living in) harmony with nature. This is contrasted with the “legal order” of his times, which he considers unnatural. People of plains, mountains and the seacoast would reciprocally provide resources which would then be equally distributed, and social castes would be abolished. It is, however, important to note that Andō considered his utopian system as already existing in Ezo (Hokkaidō) and in Holland, which he thought an island country, much like Japan. Nuita considers this to be another trademark of Japanese utopian thought – the utopias are believed to actually exist in a faraway place (Nuita 1971:20-22). He also posits that Andō's utopia is not far from utopian works in mid-seventeenth-century Britain, critical of absolutism, and concludes that similarities in social and political circumstances of both societies would give rise to similar utopian works (Nuita 1971:22-23).

Hiraga's *Fūryū Shidōken den* is a satirical work about an actual person, Shidōken Fukai (a professional storyteller based in Tōkyō's Asakusa district), who travels around feudal Japan and experiences its various facets. Hiraga creates fictional worlds such as lands of big people, dwarfs, women etc., and Nuita points out the similarity to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726/1735), although he admits that a direct influence is questionable (Nuita 1971:24). Hiraga's book also provided the impetus for a number of works in similar vein to be written, such as Yūkokushi's *Ikoku kidan, Wasōbyōe* (“Strange

Tales of Foreign Lands”, 1774) or Bakin's *Musōbyōe, kochō monogatari* (“Musōbyōe, the Tale of a Wanderer”, 1809-1810). Using these examples, Nuita means to illustrate the tendency of Japanese utopias to choose satire as their mode of expression, which does not correspond with the developments in Western utopias (Nuita 1971:24-25).

A bigger shift came with the advent of modernization and Westernization of Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912). Nonetheless, even then the Japanese utopias couldn't be said to exactly emulate the Western ones. Although Nuita acknowledges a Western influence in style and method, the works are primarily striving towards establishing a modern Japanese nation and comply with the actual conditions of Japan of that time. Accordingly, these “utopias” are not exactly critical of Japan’s status quo, which even puts such categorization itself in question (Nuita 1971:29). This characteristic of the Meiji utopias is also pointed out by Moichi, who stresses their role as “devices for education” (Moichi 1999:91). Some of these are Takase Naokuni's (1883) and Suehiro Shigeyasu's (1886) identically titled *Nijūsan-nen mirai ki* (“An Account of the Future Twenty-third Year”) referring to the twenty-third year of the Meiji era (1890) or Hattori Sei'ichi's *Nijūsan-nen rokkai mirai ki* (“Report on the National Diet in the Future Twenty-third year) (Nuita 1971:30).

Even so, Moichi argues that Japanese literature since the Meiji period cannot be examined in isolation from Western literature, and rather sets up the question of how Japan has perceived Western concepts of utopia (Moichi 1999:89). This is also due to opportunities arising for certain privileged Japanese to travel abroad, observing the outside world from which Japan had been isolated for over 150 years. With its profound reforms, culminating in the Imperial Constitution and the formation of a national parliament, the Meiji era is in fact often perceived to be the most “utopian” period in modern Japanese history (Moichi 1999:90).

The Meiji era also saw an import of Western utopias in Japan – in fact, the first translation appeared in the first year of the era (1868). Nuita ascertains about three dozen works to have been translated up until 1912, among them Bellamy or Jules Verne. More's *Utopia*, however, only appears in 1882 (Nuita 1971:30)¹³. Supporting her point of not considering Japanese and Western utopias as totally separate phenomena, Moichi (following Donald Keane) argues that these imported texts might have served to enlighten Japanese political consciousness and contribute to a higher standard of living (Moichi 1999:90).

¹³ Moichi's article gives 1881 as the year of *Utopia*'s translation, as well as (following Alfred Aldridge) claiming that in the last decade of the 19th century, 23 Western utopian texts have been translated into Japanese (Moichi 1999:90).

Yet another shift can be observed after the Second World War, which possibly can also be attributed to Japan's defeat which negated any possibility of writing classic utopian fiction. Rather, Japan's striving for economic prosperity and technological progress is mirrored by an increased consumption of Western (particularly American) science fiction stories (Moichi 1999:92-93). For his part, Nuita also asserts that in the Japan of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there is a great interest in futurology. Yet he is critical of this concept, citing its lack of a socially critical potential as its prime difference from utopia and claiming it to be little more than a theory of economic growth (Nuita 1971:17). This interest is also reflected in the literary works which Moichi takes up as examples – worth noting is the fact that all of the four examples have been written by (male) writers of canonical status: Mishima Yukio, Ōe Kenzaburō, Abe Kōbō and Murakami Haruki.

Mishima's *Utsukushii hoshi* (“Beautiful star”, 1962) has been inspired by the author's reading of about a hundred works of Western science fiction, as well as Japan's experience of two atomic bombings. The protagonists of the novel are aliens sent to Earth (the “beautiful star”) to save humanity. The novel takes up the theme of revolt against science and technology as well as the question of humanity's worth. Notably, the novel was a commercial flop compared to the rest of Mishima's output, although Moichi mentions Mishima's conviction that *Utsukushii hoshi* was his most artistically successful work. Moichi interprets this as a possible result of the Japanese reception of science fiction as “popular fiction”, while high literature has traditionally been dominated by realism (Moichi 1999:93). Ōe's *Chiryōtō* (“Tower of Treatment”, 1991) touches upon contemporary issues such as religion, HIV, and mass production – the titular *Chiryōtō* is a tower on “New Earth” in which any disease can be treated and where it is possible to obtain the perfect body. Despite the almost thirty-year wide gap between the two novels, *Chiryōtō* wasn't particularly successful either (ibid.). However, Abe's *Dai-yon kanpyōki* (“Inter Ice Age 4”, 1959), the oldest work within Moichi's corpus, managed to achieve more resonance, perhaps due to its blending of dystopia and detective fiction. The dystopian element is present in the novel's motif of computers which can predict the future, and (following a familiar dystopian narrative pattern, as discussed in 3.1.2) the search of a young “aquan” (amphibian human) for an ancient human society (ibid.). With *Dai-yon kanpyōki*, Abe also takes a different approach from his predecessors, portraying the future worlds in exclusively negative light, when he opts for an open, equivocal ending in his novel (which again, is typical for Western dystopian novels as well). By his own admission, this is supposed to stimulate readers to enter a dialogue with themselves and look to the future critically (Moichi 1999:94). The most recent of Moichi's examples is Murakami Haruki's well-known *Sekai no Owari to Hādoboirudo Wandārando*

(“Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World”, 1985), in which the author poses questions about the desirability of utopia (Booker 196, cited in Moichi 1999:94) – once more, not unlike Western dystopian novels do. As the title suggests, the novel interleaves two texts, alternating between the realms of reality and fantasy, with Moichi turning her focus on the one called *sekai no owari* (“The End of the World”). The utopian dilemma here lies in the fact that its inhabitants lose their shadows and emotions in exchange for immortality. The protagonist, reading dreams in a library, enters a dispute with his shadow, which wants to escape the town. The revelation that this fantasy town is a mental creation of the protagonist himself leads Moichi to her interpretation that the splitting of the subject into the shadow and his self indicates a possibility that utopia is no longer desirable for contemporary individuals (Moichi 1999:94-95).

The conclusions one can draw concerning the relevance of utopia in Japan, then, are somewhat skeptic. A major issue Nuita takes with Eastern (including Japan) utopias is their seeming lack of creative energy to produce new civilizations (Nuita 1971:32). Moichi points out that Murakami's novel is exemplary in displaying the waning political consciousness of contemporary writers, as opposed to authors of the post-war period. On the other hand, due to its new narrative approach, she also considers *Sekai no owari* to provide good ground for asking what should constitute utopian and dystopian literature in the future. She also suggests that in light of its apparent “weakness”, Japanese literature can serve to re-examine the definition and function of utopian and dystopian literature – both of which are rather ambiguous in themselves – on a global level (Moichi 1999:95).

3.3.2 Putting words into action: utopian practice in Japan

The setting of Kirino Natsuo's *Poritikon* is rather unusual for a contemporary novel dealing with the concept of utopia, as should have become evident by the examination of Chapter 2. Not only does Kirino choose her “ambiguous utopia” to be an agricultural utopian community in north Japan, situating it temporally in a recent past (1997-1998) as well as the present (the second part takes place in 2008 and was serialized from 2009 to 2010) – in spite of the commune itself being fictional, it bears a striking number of similarities with a well-known, real commune called Atarashiki mura („New village“; originally founded in Kyūshū, but now mostly relocated to Saitama). Along with the novel's obvious references to Leo Tolstoy and the philosophy of “Tolstoyanism” he inspired (for instance, in a speech given by the commune's founder), the utopian practice of Atarashiki mura, its ideological basis and its

situation nowadays will be examined below.

It should also be clarified what exactly is meant by the term “commune”, or “communitary group”, which Brumann (1998) uses synonymously. He describes this as a group of people – male and female – who don't necessarily share familial bounds, live together and voluntarily share their property, while consciously turning against socially established practices and towards their respective ideological objective. The shared property is a central concept here: land, buildings, technical equipment and vehicles cannot be the property of any single member (Brumann 1998a:1-2). Brumann, writing in German, also points out the linguistic differences in the use of several related terms, and sees those groups which operate with the noun “communities” (in English) as opposed to “groups” which do not share property (Brumann 1998a:5). Other communal systems which Brumann excludes from his definition of utopian communes are, for instance, kolkhozes and people's communes (or “communities of goods”), enforced by the state and not deviating from societal norms, and monasteries for their elite status, gender restrictions etc. (Brumann 2003:396-397).

Brumann also underlines that the utopianism of these communes is the aspect which fascinates those taking part in them and those who observe them alike, while revealing that he never encountered a group which would come into existence purely out of a material and utilitarian motivation. On the contrary, all of them either have a strong ideological basis behind them – or at least did up to some point – and the idea behind an alternative design of society often implies its global adaptation, were it to be successful on a small scale (Brumann 1998a:11). Aspects of communitarian groups echoing utopian ideas are, however, not limited solely to these practical manifestations, but can also be found within concepts of “community” in a very general sense. Following the anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen, Blackshaw (2010) argues that imagery, boundary marking processes, customs, habits, rituals and their communication – all of which can be described as symbols – are fundamental for the construction of a community (Blackshaw 2010:6). And on a very basic level, the double helix of utopia/dystopia also runs through the concept of community, with its exclusivity being as important as its inclusiveness. Blackshaw points out that communities are often demanding their members' faithfulness, and that in the process of very strictly differentiating between “us” and “them” they create an array of “Others” (outsiders, strangers, aliens etc.), which provokes conflicts and cements social inequalities (Blackshaw 2010:151-152).

The central meaning of (common) symbols for basically any given community is part of a general agreement within community studies which claims all modern communities to be “hermeneutic”. For

members of communities, this also manifests itself through the importance of two factors: connection and feeling of home (Blackshaw 2010:6-7). In so-called “imaginary communities”¹⁴, people often aim to express their “deviant” (from the norms of their respective, mainstream society) interests and identities with the like-minded. Following Zygmunt Bauman, Blackshaw argues that utopia today manifests itself in no particular place, is “hardly ever a one-off act” (Blackshaw 2010:144), while displaying a strong tendency to be imagined “from below” rather than “from above” (Bauman 2003:22, cited in Blackshaw 2010:144). Yet in their concrete form of communes, utopian societies often attract criticism for being escapist, instigating no change in their environment and only serve for their members to flee from the problems of society. This criticism was particularly strong in the 1970s, when a distinct, global communal wave was to be observed. However, Brumann suggests that the fascination with some of the communes in Japan – among them Atarashiki mura –, the role of the Israeli Kibbutzim within the foundation of the State of Israel or the fight against racism of Koinonia, located in the U.S. state of Georgia, should stress the fact that their social effects are greater than usually acknowledged. He also reminds us that the inability of communes to realize their objectives in their full scope is not exclusive to these systems (Brumann 1998a:19-20).

What meaning, then, can the utopian practice of running a commune transmit to society? As with utopian literature, there are bonds between that which – in the case of communes which in fact *do* exist (as opposed to the fictional, utopian societies created in literary texts) – might be called the “actual” and the “ideal”. Brumann argues that communes can provide insight into the possibilities and boundaries of a deliberate cultural change. The reason for this is that the culture of the members itself is under close scrutiny during the formation of a commune, which is a different situation from that of living in a “normal” society, where reflections on one's own culture are much more limited. This, of course, does not guarantee a successful overcoming of said culture's limitations (Brumann 1998a:12). Brumann also maintains that the cultural “baggage” and socialization effects of at least the founders have to be taken into account; also, none of the communes he had studied managed to separate itself completely from the larger society, which maintains the greater power and influence in the relation between the two. The larger society also does not have any agenda concerning the respective commune, which however does not apply in reverse, and the communes only have very limited ability to change society due to their small scope and weak influence. Therefore, communes always have to confront their environment and

¹⁴ “Imaginary community” is Phillip E. Wegner's term for communities which are fantastic projections, alternative ways of “conjuring, narrating and making the world” (Blackshaw 2010:137). Following this definition, literary utopian societies might be called imaginary communities as well.

its (negative) development (Brumann 1998a:272-273).

Another problematic element might lie with the concept of community itself, which carries with it a different meaning in modern society (where communities are encountered in different “varieties”) than it did in pre-modernity (when community was “singular”). Blackshaw also argues that due to its completeness, integration of subject and object, individual and society, community is an “achievement of social unchange” (Blackshaw 2010:23), interestingly echoing the much criticized utopian stasis. In connection with community, hermeneutics (as mentioned above) function to render meaning, but often also feelings of nostalgia and closeness (Heller 1999, cited in Blackshaw 2010:30), while also operating with ideology and “dreams of utopia”. Last but not least, community in postmodern times can only superficially symbolize mutuality and profound relationships, while in fact it is only being “consumed” (Blackshaw 2010:30-31).

3.3.3 Atarashiki mura, a new place for a new life

The utopian commune Atarashiki mura was founded in 1918 by writer Mushanokōji Saneatsu (his name’s characters also sometimes read Mushakōji, 1885-1976), a member of the literary group *Shirakaba-ha* (“White Birch Group”). It was originally located in the Miyazaki prefecture and called “Hyūga Atarashiki mura” after the archaic name of that prefecture, mostly relocating to Moroyama (in Saitama prefecture) after a flood from a dam construction project in 1938 (Yiu 2008a:204). Mushanokōji started to develop his utopian plans already around 1906, writing down (in the form of a dream) a concept of utopia similar to what would become Atarashiki mura (Klopfenstein 2011:375). In the spring of 1918, he rallied a number of interested persons, which quickly amounted to forty, and publicly announced his project in the May/June issue of the magazine *Shirakaba* (“White birch”). July already saw the publishing of the first issue of the *Atarashiki mura* magazine, and Mushanokōji raised further funds from his own savings, by selling his own house and by receiving a generous donation from an unknown donor (Klopfenstein 2011:376). However, he would only stay for a relatively short time, leaving the commune in 1926 due to his elderly mother requiring care, but allegedly also because of his womanizing. He would continue to provide financial support for the commune, and it was only in 1956 that it achieved economic independence by raising poultry and producing eggs. In 1978, two years after Mushanokōji’s death, Atarashiki mura hit a peak in population, when around sixty people lived there. After this, however, the village began to stagnate and now has to deal with its aging, which brings with itself the promise of its

end. Nonetheless, the commune still exists as of today (already having an extraordinarily long life span), being home to around seventeen people and having a circle of around 180 supporters (Klopfenstein 2011:385-386). Nowadays, the egg production still makes up the primary source of the village's income, while its members also grow tea, shiitake mushrooms, organic rice, vegetables and fruits. There is also a museum dedicated to Mushanokōji, a communal canteen which doubles as an auditorium, an atelier and living quarters (Yiu 2008a:204). The existence of a museum is important to mention – not least due to Christoph Brumann's assessment that the institution of a museum is testament to the respective commune's readiness to canonize and represent its past, and manifests the fact that the commune ceases to function as a movement. On the contrary, nothing should change, calling to mind the 'utopian stasis' discussed in the previous chapter (Brumann 1998b:359).

The commune, of course, did not come into existence out of the blue, and just as utopian literature, its genesis has to be examined in a specific social and political context. The early 20th century was a turbulent time for Japan, and the country suffered economic hardships during and after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Japan, however, recovered from this; subsequently, it exploited the vacuum in Asian markets and experienced (its colonies excluded) an economic growth, which expanded particularly during World War I. In the years from 1916 to 1920 – during which time Atarashiki mura was founded – Japan experienced a short period of a bubble economy, and war business provided a strong impetus for its own imperialistic expansion in China and Korea. Yet this bubble economy also brought about economic disparities, prominently expressed through the so-called "rice riots" in 1918, and the economy finally took a definitive turn for the worse in 1920. Atarashiki mura was founded within this climate of precariousness, and Yiu argues that its conceptual principles in part respond to this situation (Yiu 2008a:207). Klopfenstein also suggests that the Russian revolution could have had an inspiring effect on Mushanokōji (Klopfenstein 2011:375).

Mushanokōji's utopia also wasn't a singular phenomenon at the time. Other writers from the same generation, that is, of the late Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishō periods (1912-1926), came up with their own practical utopias as well. Prominent among these are Arishima Takeo (himself a member of the *Shirakaba* group, 1878-1923), who in 1922 handed over an inherited plot of land to tenants in order to turn it into a communal farm, and Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), who founded the so-called Rasuchijin Association (*Rasuchijin kyōkai*) in 1926 to improve the cultural and economic situation of farmers in Hanamaki, Iwate prefecture. What Yiu identifies as a likely source of these utopian impulses is a combination of Christian humanism, Buddhist benevolence, the humanistic ideas of Tolstoy, John

Ruskin, Edward Carpenter or William Morris, and attempts to react against the hardship and poverty of those who weren't living in financial security. What sets Atarashiki mura apart from these other attempts is, of course, the fact that it is still existing 95 years after its foundation (Yiu 2008a:205). Particularly strong and omnipresent in this context seems to be the influence of Leo Tolstoy, who inspired not only Mushanokōji (Klopfenstein 2011:375), but also Tokutomi Rōka (1868-1927), Arishima Takeo (Yiu 2008a:210) or the founder of the religious commune Ittō-en, Nishida Tenkō (Brumann 1998b:345).

The underlying concept of Atarashiki mura was discussed by Mushanokōji in numerous writings. Yiu chooses to focus on three “dialogues” called *Dai'ichi no taiwa*, *Dai'ni no taiwa* and *Daisan no taiwa* (“Dialogue No. 1/2/3”), respectively, which came out in the same year the village was constructed. It is noteworthy that these “dialogues” are composed in the traditionally “utopian” Socratic form, with Mushanokōji being addressed as a *sensei* (“teacher”) by an anonymous interviewer. The tenets of Atarashiki mura are as follows:

1. To create a fair, reasonable society;
2. To address the injustice borne by laborers in modern society (especially the modern system of production and capitalism);
3. To create a communal life, especially communal eating for economic and community reasons;
4. To emphasize self (the ego [*jiko* 自己], mankind (*jinrui* 人類), nature (*shizen* 自然), love (*ai* 愛), virtue (*zen* 善), beauty (*bi* 美), happiness (*fukai yorokobi* 深い喜び). (Yiu 2008a:208)

Mushanokōji also promotes a different approach to labor, money and art than that which was prevalent in Taishō Japan. With Atarashiki mura, he sought to create an environment where it would be possible to work in a “fully human way” in order to restore dignity and sanctity to labor, seeing laboring for money alone as spiritually demeaning. The labor hours are shortened¹⁵ in order to allow the members to pursue art, culture and their respective “natural gift” (*tenshoku*). Following these thoughts on labor, regular wages are disposed of in the village and villagers receive a small, equal amount of spending money in lieu of salary, while other expenses are covered by a communal village fund. In the past, donations from Mushanokōji, his artist friends, as well as from so-called “non-residential members” (*songai kai'in*) helped to sustain the village as well. Yet as far as art is concerned, the village was always affluent and its members were always surrounded with music and literature, and even when they lived

¹⁵ Just as in Thomas More's *Utopia*, the members' working day is made up of six hours. Their allowance, mentioned in the same paragraph, is 35,000 yen a month, and among the necessities covered by the village fund are food, lodging, clothing and medical expenses (Yiu 2008a:204).

on scarce diets, two Rodin sculptures decorated the premises since early days. The village had maintained an atelier (at some points, even two) and an in-house printing press. Yiu stresses the fact that the village is an example of art transcending into life, or an extension of literary imagination, which was also Mushanokōji's explicit intention (Yiu 2008a:208-209).

Mushanokōji was, by his own admission, greatly influenced by two literary figures: Natsume Sōseki and Leo Tolstoy. As Yiu argues, each stands for a symbolic path – Sōseki for a “destruction” of utopia, Tolstoy for its “construction”. By extension, Atarashiki mura can be seen as on one hand a reaction to the social, political and economic circumstances of Taishō Japan which Sōseki questions without providing answers or solutions in his fiction; on the other, as Mushanokōji's answer to *Yasnaya Polyana*, where Tolstoy's estate, in which he had lived and written, is located (Yiu 2008a:215). Yiu also points to Mushanokōji's literary development during the decade in which Atarashiki mura was founded (1911 to 1921). Not only did he publish essays concerning the commune directly (such as the three “dialogues” mentioned above), which spread his agenda of knowing and loving oneself - this was also the time span during which he developed his own “doctrine of egoism” which proves crucial for the contextualization of his utopian thinking (Yiu 2008a:220-221). The core of his “rhetoric of egoism” (*jiko shugi*) is present already in his essay *Kizoku shugi* (“The Aristocratic Doctrine”, 1909). The essay presents his belief that a selected few are born with a superior nature in order to rule over inferior ‘commoners’. As Yiu argues, Mushanokōji's idea of individualism might be wrapped in a rhetoric of ‘love and salvation’, but he actually only advocates an ego expansion of this ‘superior’ minority (Yiu 2008a:216).

While this early writing already hints at the dark side of Mushanokōji's utopianism, this culminates in his 1943 essay *Dai tōa sensō shikan* (“A Personal View of the Greater East Asia War”), which primarily deals with three ideas – the divine mission of a chosen people, creation of an ideal state, and ethnic harmony (Yiu 2008b:218). Yiu argues that the idea of a “virtuous Japan” entrusted with a divine mission of “liberation and improving humanity” is already to be found within the above mentioned *Kizoku shugi*, and is evidenced through the creation of Atarashiki mura, which would stand for an utopian state in its “embryonic form” (Yiu 2008b:219). Even the short work time of six hours would separate the “common” members of the commune from its founder who, through pursuing his natural gift as a writer full-time and thus providing its financial backbone, could rise above their status (Yiu 2008b:220). Yiu further suggests that Mushanokōji's rhetoric in *Dai tōa sensō shikan* is in accordance with the nationalist rhetoric of Japan of the 1930s and 1940s, practically manifesting itself in a utopian scheme, the creation of Manchukuo, a puppet state in China (Yiu 2008b:221). The connection is further reinforced by the

village's name itself, as Mushanokōji operates with the term *Atarashiki Nippon* (“New Japan”) in *Dai tōa sensō shikan* (Yiu 2008b:222). Even though the writing came out long after the commune's founding, it is not uninteresting to consider Atarashiki mura and Manchukuo in a shared context, brought together by the writer – especially as Kirino Natsuo's first idea for *Poritikon* dealt with natives of Manchukuo (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2012:224).

4. “I live to love my friends, live to love the soil, live for the people”: Kirino Natsuo’s

Poritikon

As should be clear from the preceding chapters, tackling utopian motives is a rather unusual move for Japanese authors, with literary utopias usually failing to make any significant impact, even when they are written by well-established authors (as, for example, Mishima Yukio or Ōe Kenzaburō). As discussed in Chapter 2, there is also the issue of defining utopia (as it is no longer viable to write about idealized, flawless societies, the definition of what constitutes utopia becomes increasingly nebulous), along with the questionable effectiveness of utopian literature in contemporary socio-political context. All this, however, are precisely reasons for taking a closer look at *Poritikon*: Written by a self-proclaimed outsider to Japanese literary circles, how does Kirino Natsuo construct her fictional utopia, and how does the novel fit into the greater context of Kirino’s oeuvre and the general discourse on literary utopias in and outside of Japan?

Poritikon is a rather untypical novel within both of these frameworks for a number of reasons. Here, Kirino takes up the utopian theme in, so far, the most explicit manner among her works (although it is not her only work which could, at least partially, be described as utopian, as will be discussed below): The utopian society portrayed in *Poritikon*, an agricultural commune called Iwan-mura (itself a reference to Tolstoy’s short story *Ivan the Fool*¹⁶), is of central importance to the novel’s plot and its protagonists, Takanami Toichi and Nakajima Maya. Both their existences are profoundly influenced by their life in the community, albeit in very different ways and contexts. It is also important to note that Kirino Natsuo creates ‘her own’ utopia only in part. Although Iwan-mura is a fictional place, Kirino explicitly alludes to the existing commune of Atarashiki mura, even endowing Iwan-mura with a similar history. This

¹⁶ The story deals with the simple peasant Ivan and his two brothers, who become a soldier and a merchant, respectively. They mock Ivan for sticking to farming, but it is him who ultimately comes to rule the country, Tolstoy’s moral being that farming is the most honorable work of all. This, as for instance pointed out by Kumar (1987:26-27), is a pattern to be found in much of utopian literature.

allows her to create a link between the past and the present Japan, as well as between fact and fiction, a staple of her writing. While literary utopias served as inspirations for the founding of utopian communities in the past, Kirino reverses this dynamic in *Poritikon*. The following chapter should examine Kirino's construction of utopia, and also her treatment of utopia as social commentary.

The novel's title might be a good point to start these examinations. The word *politikon* comes from Aristotle's concept of a *zoon politikon*, that is a 'political animal' or a social being, given that Aristotle does not separate politics and society (Tunçel 2012:245). According to Christoph Rapp, the political nature of human beings means that they can only develop themselves within the framework of a society governed by law – the state – due to their need for cooperation, pursuit of self-sufficiency (autarky) and ability to communicate through speech (Rapp 2001:55). On the other hand, Satō Masaru focuses on the basis of the word, *polis* (city-state), an opposite of *oikos* (economy, household), with *nomos* (law, order) being the fundamental principle of *polis*. On the other hand, the basis of an *oikos* is *bia* – violence, through which, in Greek thought, men were supposed to control the household and economy (Satō/Kirino 2009/2011:202). In the novel's context, the concept of *zoon politikon* is ironic on multiple levels: Firstly, a utopian commune represents a rejection of its members' society (in this case, Japan) and as such could be seen as an assembly of people who could *not* find human satisfaction within the framework of a "state". Secondly, Kirino chooses to depict her two protagonists as having completely different, even contrasting backgrounds and personal histories, yet living as misfits both within and outside the utopian community of Iwan-mura. Satō's focus on the words *polis* and *oikos* is intriguing as well, considering the economic hardships of Iwan-mura play a central role within the novel's plot; the metaphorical "city-state" of Iwan-mura is constituted by its few households, and both are mutually dependent. What's more, "law and order" and "violence" become entwined with foul power play in the village and an involvement of yakuza in its economic matters. The title's significance, as well as the novel's socially critical and utopian elements shall be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

4.1 In the creator's words: Kirino Natsuo's authorial intentions

In a 2008 interview with Satō Masaru (when the novel only began its serialization), Kirino admitted that she had attempted to write *Poritikon* in a somewhat different tone from her other works: Calling it an "experiment", she claims her aim was to explore the 1960s phenomenon of communes, and to pursue the question of what happens after a charismatic leader draws people to live together. Her intention was to

move away from “writing about small-minded people”, which she had done until then, and to attempt to grasp the concept of charisma (Satō/Kirino 2009/2011:210). The novel apparently also went through a number of transformations from the initial concept Kirino mentions in an interview with Minagawa Hiroko. She speaks of her fascination with *taiga shōsetsu* (which could be loosely translated as “saga” or a *roman-fleuve*) which depict their characters undergoing change within a long span of time; she also speaks of her idea to write a novel about a group of young people who create their own country, and how she might dismiss her initial plan to write it as an “ensemble novel” (*gunzō shōsetsu*)¹⁷ in favor of a *taiga shōsetsu* form (Minagawa/Kirino 2009/2011:56). Kirino also elaborates on this first concept in an interview with Sasaki Atsushi, saying that at first, she had wanted to write a story about political refugees and people wanting a different nationality, which motivates them create their own state. Then she would think about how they would manage this state, and wanted to incorporate the aspect that a nationality was something one could purchase by credit card. She developed the small community of Iwan-mura from her reflection on the idea of what would become of people once they overcome the boundaries of a nation (Sasaki/Kirino 2011). In a 2008 interview with Bandō Masako, Kirino speaks about her original intention to set the novel in Tōyō-chō, in the Kōchi Prefecture (located on the southern island of Shikoku – a stark contrast to the northern setting of Iwan-mura in the Yamagata Prefecture). At this stage, the novel was supposed to be premised on the fact that the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo still existed and its people would gather in Kōchi, participating in the creation of a new country (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2011:224-225). It is possible that it was through Manchukuo that Atarashiki mura came about to Kirino, due to the ideological link of Atarashiki mura’s founder Mushanokōji Saneatsu between the two, as discussed in the previous chapter. Mushanokōji’s ideological views already offer a highly ambivalent take on utopia, one that could only come to full fruition in oppression – and suggest a tense dynamic between harmony and power which becomes an integral element of *Poritikon*.

Another difference, is Kirino’s intention to move away from what she calls “city novels” (*toshi shōsetsu*) with *Poritikon*. She argues that even her previous novel *Tōkyō-jima* – a story of survivors on an abandoned island – could be described as such. Focusing on the countryside and its specific problems – in this case, aging and declining population – would allow Kirino to take up problems specific to (contemporary) Japan; on the other hand, the “low life” in Tōkyō might actually not be that far away

¹⁷ The term *gunzō shōsetsu* is not defined more closely in the interview; Kirino seems to mean a novel focused on a relatively large (‘ensemble’) cast of characters – her *Tōkyō-jima* might be an example within her oeuvre.

from that in New York (Bandō/Kirino 2009/2011:226-227). It should thus be examined in what ways Kirino treads new paths in *Poritikon*, and which of her literary patterns recur.

4.2 Born in utopia, blooming in dystopia? *Poritikon*'s protagonists

Structurally, *Poritikon* is broken down into two parts, with the first part focusing on the Iwan-mura native Takanami Toichi and the second part focusing on Nakajima Maya, who comes to seek shelter in the commune following her mother's arrest in North Korea. The two parts have not been serialized successively¹⁸ and don't take place at the same time (as would usually be the case with Kirino's multiple perspective narrative). Kirino herself admits that she abandoned her usual narrative method in *Poritikon*, choosing to focus on the story of a single person each in their two respective parts (Sasaki/Kirino 2011). This duality is also reflected on the covers of the *tankōbon* (hardcover) edition: both utilize the same layout and each shows a picture of a rooster (albeit in a different position), but with a contrasting background (blue/red). In a yin-yang-like relation, Toichi is associated with a white color and the concept of utopia, while Maya is associated with the black and dystopian on the promotional *obi* strips covering the volumes – the blurb “born in utopia, blooming in dystopia” (*yūtopia ni umarete, disutopia ni saku*) is divided between the two strips. It is also important to note that the first part is longer (six chapters with a greater page count) than the second (four chapters and the prologue). It could thus be said that the novel focuses more on its male protagonist. Although this might seem unusual for a Kirino novel, considering the attention her female protagonists usually get in the discourse on her work, Kirino has been increasingly focusing on writing from the perspective of male characters in *Metabora* (2007), *Tōkyō-jima* (2008) and *Yasashii otona* (2010)¹⁹, all published shortly prior to or during *Poritikon*'s conception and serialization.

¹⁸ The first part was serialized in *Shūkan bunshun* from the August 16-23, 2007 issue to the November 27, 2008 issue. The second part, including the novel's prologue, were serialized (under the title *Apokaripushisu* [“Apokalypsis”]) in *Bessatsu Bungeishunjū* from the January 2009 issue to the November 2010 issue.

¹⁹ The dates refer to the publication of the *tankōbon* editions – the first publications in book form.

4.2.1 “Selfish vitality”: Takanami Toichi

Takanami Toichi, the male protagonist of *Poritikon*'s first part, is 27 years old at the beginning of the novel, and the only young person remaining in Iwan-mura. Obviously, Kirino paints the picture of an aging society rather extremely; the only other remaining Yamagata native appearing in the novel is Toichi's friend Yoshiyuki, who remains a minor character throughout. The second-youngest resident²⁰ of Iwan-mura at the plot's beginning is Kumada Alice, a 48-year old former hippie who moved to Iwan-mura in the 1960s. Within the first pages of the first chapter, Toichi is described as a farmer leading an uneventful life:

“Only Toichi remained. After graduating from a local high school, he tended to the fields, planting rice on a small paddy, raising poultry, shoveling the snow, helping the elderly out and doing all sorts of things for the village.

Aside from a school trip to Sendai and Tōkyō, he had never traveled anywhere, nor did he have a girlfriend. It would be a lie to say he wasn't impatient, but because this was his ‘fatherland’, he felt strongly he couldn't leave, that no matter what he couldn't abandon it.” (Kirino 2011a:37).

Toichi's bond to Iwan-mura is largely a familial one, as he is the son of the commune's chairman (*rijichō*) Takanami Soichi, and a direct descendant of Takanami Sohō, a (fictional) sculptor and one of the village's founders. This bond is further underlined by the opening scene of the first chapter – readers encounter Toichi as he removes ice and snow from a totem pole standing before the village. This totem pole, sculpted by Takanami, bears the “Iwan-mura manifesto” written by the other founder, fictional *Shirakaba-ha*²¹ novelist Raga Makoto: “I live to love my friends, live to love the soil, live for the people” (Kirino 2011a:36). Toichi also has a recurring nightmare in which Raga appears and admonishes him that Iwan-mura, rather than Japan, is Toichi's fatherland and that he is obliged to watch over it, calling him “Iwan-mura's purebred” (Kirino 2011a:36-37). Later, Toichi discovers that his biological mother is in fact Raga's granddaughter Kazuko (instead of his supposed mother Yaiko, who is unrelated to the

²⁰ The second-youngest *person* staying in the village at the novel's beginning is Kaneshiro, who is around Toichi's age. However, he is only admitted as a resident member together with Kunita/Kitada's family (Kirino 2011a:163).

²¹ The *Shirakaba-ha* (White Birch Group) was a literary circle associated with Japan's anti-naturalist movement, based around the magazine *Shirakaba*, active roughly at the time of the Taishō democracy (1912-1926). The magazine familiarized the Japanese public with European impressionist and postimpressionist artists. Its novelists are remembered to this day (Mortimer 1999:57), and include names such as Arishima Takeo, Shiga Naoya or Mushanokōji Saneatsu.

village's founders), which makes him a descendant of both founders at once. Kazuko lives in Tōkyō – moving there eventually becomes Toichi's sole experience of living outside of a utopian community until the novel's last chapter.

At the same time, Toichi realizes the lack of perspective he has as a young person and starts to reflect on drinking and meeting foreign women in a hostess club in the nearby town of Shinjō as his only true pleasures in life. He also knows he is not in a position to choose a wife so long as he stays, and therefore already considers moving to Tōkyō rather than spend a “miserable youth” (Kirino 2011a:84). Yet upon visiting Tōkyō for the first time, Toichi realizes the need to take care of Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:129). This “need”, however, is informed by his expectation to become the village's next chairman and his own illusions of its future, fueled especially by the arrival of the fifteen-year old Maya:

“My village. The village I will make endure, I will make big and populous, and rule it forever. Young, happy villagers would be crossing the village road, work a bit at noon, drink together at night; it would be a village of happily living villagers. He wouldn't say that to anybody, of course, but Maya was at its center.” (Kirino 2011a:185)

Toichi is clearly portrayed as a person hungry for power which he could wield over Iwan-mura – a contradiction to the egalitarian promise of a utopian community. This, however, also stems from his lifelong attachment to the village and a rather hopeless predicament of spending his youth in an aging commune. His rather unrealistic fantasies of Iwan-mura full of young people might only be a reaction to him lacking control over his own life and surroundings, or his inability to arrange his life (or adjust to “mainstream” society, as the section detailing his stay in Tōkyō will show). On the other hand, he fails to become a convincing and charismatic leader of Iwan-mura – as opposed to the independent farmer Yamaji, who wins most of the “old” village over with his natural authority. This power disparity and resulting competition contributes to conflicts and an eventual splitting of the village. This split will be described in more detail in the section on the utopian aspects of *Poritikon* (5.3.4).

More so than wield absolute power over Iwan-mura, then, Toichi rather fulfills roles imposed on him by this miniature society. The above-mentioned farmer (and the village's leader figure) Yamaji has the following plans for Toichi's function within Iwan-mura: “So Toichi will become famous when he goes on television, (as) a charismatic chairman of Iwan-mura. No, maybe he'll become the charismatic leader of Japan's agriculture [as a whole]” (Kirino 2011b:82). The reasoning behind this is that if Toichi becomes the village's (publicity) ‘star’, he would raise awareness about the village and thus raise the

market price of its produce (Kirino 2011b:83). A similar suggestion is made by a young researcher and farming enthusiast called Tachibana Yūsuke, who arrives in and joins Iwan-mura with a plan to revitalize the commune towards the end of *Poritikon*'s first part. For his part, Tachibana proposes to Toichi to spread the word about a village in media outlets as its “PR manager” (Kirino 2011b:193), to which Toichi poses the question whether he should become the village's next Raga Makoto and gather money in “risky ventures” (ibid.); an existence bound together with the village in the public's consciousness, but never actually running it. Toichi also realizes that even when the village is not divided in two camps anymore thanks to Tachibana's efforts, he would still have no place to fit within this new conception (Kirino 2011b:194). On the other hand, it is Toichi himself who starts to use the name “Raga Toichi” in exchanges with business partners and mass media by his own volition prior to both of these proposals, and thus in a way acquires a new identity, more closely and obviously associated with the well-known founder Raga Makoto. The first time he comes up with this new persona is when he chances to meet a manager of a high-quality grocery store chain, reasoning: “‘Raga Toichi’ was like an artist name, he thought. There was no way he wouldn't make use of Raga's name, overwhelmingly well known in Tōkyō. That was his pose towards *Inō-ya*” (Kirino 2011a:405). Assuming the name Raga stands for an appropriation of power, of a “name”, yet even this proves futile in the end. Toichi's reputation is problematic outside the village as well. On the one hand, he is hailed as a pioneer of organic farming, building a village which puts ecology in practice and which “preserves the soul of agriculture” (Kirino 2011b:128). On the other, he is dismissed as an “amateur who knows nothing of farming” (ibid.). The first part of *Poritikon* thus ends on a rather undecided note, and it is unclear whether Iwan-mura will thrive eventually, and what exactly Toichi's position is going to be.

4.2.1.1 Uprooted: Toichi's life in Tōkyō

An alternative lifestyle presents itself, in Toichi's case, with life in Tōkyō. After his first visit to his biological mother Kazuko and his subsequent return, he nurtures illusions about the big city life and a different kind of youth he could have lived. He imagines himself living with a different, “cooler” version of Kazuko, as a student of Tōkyō University singing in a band and chased by girls, and after that, as a salaryman in a first-class company. He finally imagines himself riding on the Yamanote line which, with its circular form, apparently becomes a symbol of yet another way of life from which there is no escape – this is underlined by the negative feelings this mental image brings about in Toichi (Kirino 2011a:147).

Immediately after his arrival, Toichi realizes the startling difference between his lifestyle and that of his former childhood friends, all of which have moved to cities, thinking of himself (referring to Tolstoy) as “Ivan the Fool” (Kirino 2011a:125).

After his move to Tōkyō, Toichi is constantly confronted with his difference. For instance, he stays in Tōkyō during a heatwave (conveying an image of Tōkyō as ‘hell’, a quite literal dystopia), yet is ordered not to use the air conditioning by Kazuko in order to save money; he also has no choice but to stay with her, since he has no money of his own coming from Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:245). Tellingly, the only friend he makes is not a Japanese, but a Chinese student (ibid.). Working part-time on numerous occasions, Toichi experiences being treated with contempt as a “bumpkin” (*inakamono*; Kirino 2011a:248), and this ostracizing leads him to take over Kazuko’s café *Lager*²² (ibid.). He turns it into a music club called *Dystopia*, but even this venture (and by extension, an attempt to break away from Iwan-mura) does not yield any perspective or profit, partly due to its location in a quiet housing area (Kirino 2011a:247). Again, Toichi is located in an undesirable position, practically without any peers and in dire financial straits – ironically, he lives a life on the periphery even in Japan’s cultural and economic center without much chance for becoming upwardly mobile. In that sense, it could be said that Toichi ‘fits the bill’ of a marginal Kirino character, along with Alice’s sons, who are the only Iwan-mura ‘expatriates’ of Toichi’s age in the novel. One of these, Shōma, works as a gigolo when Toichi first encounters him in Tōkyō, after withdrawing from the *jieitai* (the Japanese self-defense forces) and working for a security company (Kirino 2011a:268-269). It is also Shōma who becomes an ‘errand runner’ for Kosugi, a yakuza boss who deals with Toichi during the plot’s course (Kirino 2011b:19). The other son, Ryōma, has disappeared after being evicted for failing to pay rent (Kirino 2011a:273); he is found again later on. Kirino underlines the importance of Toichi’s sojourn in Tōkyō by including descriptions of his physical transformation: he loses weight and lets his hair grow, and even reflects upon how nobody might recognize him if he came back (Kirino 2011a:257), which actually proves true with his friend Yoshiyuki, who comes to pick him up at the airport (Kirino 2011a:315).

²² Japanese: *Ragā*, a wordplay on the surname Raga.

4.2.1.2 Yin, yang: Women in Toichi's life

Just as with Kirino's female characters, she does not shy away from exploring Toichi as a sexual being. In fact, Toichi is in large part governed by his unfulfilled sexual drive, and one of the first observations he makes about his surroundings is that nobody knows about this hard fight that was "forced upon him" (Kirino 2011a:39). His financial situation doesn't allow Toichi to spend any money beyond bare necessities. Because he couldn't cover any eventual dating expenses, and also due to lack of free time, he has no sexual encounters while in Tōkyō, and realizes that "he was determined to live happily when he left for Kazuko['s place], but for that, women are crucial" (Kirino 2011a:318). In that sense, the town of Shinjō proves to be a more viable option for Toichi, especially after a sudden influx of foreign hostesses. Toichi also reflects upon the influence of the Korean refugee Suon's presence in Iwan-mura, since her presence provides an essential impetus for his father Soichi to write a new theater play (ibid.). Toichi's situation changes especially after the arrival of Hoa, a young Vietnamese who first came to Japan to marry a farmer. Toichi is able to carry out sexual relations regularly with either of the two women, turning the village's assembly hall into what he calls a 'sexual utopia', which in turn makes the villagers gossip and mistrust him (Kirino 2011b:38-39). This extends beyond the borders of Iwan-mura and prompts an elderly non-residential member to write a letter with the following words:

True love. Weren't those who put this love in practice Mr. Raga Makoto, who had thrown away his private property for the poor and suffering, and Mr. Takanami Sohō, who had given all of his personal luxury to the village? To devote oneself to the poor, and to those neighbors not related by blood – that was the spirit of Iwan-mura. I strongly protest against Mr. Takanami Toichi, who not only does not understand this lofty spirit, but only seeks to satisfy his own animal desires, carrying on being the chairman. If this is not complied with, I intend to cease being a non-residential member. (Kirino 2011b:172)

Here, Kirino might be commenting on the older generation's stance towards sexuality, which undergoes a change in contemporary times: Toichi and the foreign women have a rather liberal attitude towards their polygamy, with Hoa openly admitting that "women have their needs too"²³ (Kirino 2011a:438). This causes an uproar among the older villagers, despite the fact that, as Alice tells Toichi at one point, they themselves were practicing free love and a significant sexual openness in the past

²³ However, this positive stance towards casual sex is offset somewhat by Hoa's previous remark that she was asked by Suon to visit Toichi in her place, otherwise she wouldn't be able to stay in Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:437).

(Kirino 2011a:101). The problem, then, might either lie with this younger generation's more frank stance towards sexuality (neither of the involved parties is portrayed as flaunting these relations, yet neither as doing anything in particular to conceal them), or with the ethnicity of the women involved – as could be expected, Kirino does not provide any answer herself. The liberal stance towards sexuality, in stark contrast with the apparently sexually inactive villagers, can also be read as Kirino employing the motif of 'sexuality as strategy of defense in a surveillance state' (Ferns 1999:125) as described in Chapter 3.1.2, given that Iwan-mura is a rather panoptical micro-society where seemingly everyone keeps track of each other.

The most important relationship for Toichi is, however, that with the young Nakajima Maya. Kirino apparently rejects making the most prominent male-female relationship of her novel one of a "love at first sight", instead making Toichi's love a one-sided one and, on top of that, one that is decidedly tinged with overtones of obsession. Already during their first encounter, Toichi feels that he wants to know all there is about her – not least "her birthday, her blood type, her zodiac sign" (Kirino 2011a:156) – and he feels jealous towards other men looking at her (ibid.). The absence of Maya is one of the factors Toichi never gets used to while living in Tōkyō; he is convinced that what he feels for her is true love and that he wouldn't be able to find any woman to replace her (Kirino 2011a:249). His biggest rival in Iwan-mura thus becomes the young theater enthusiast Kaneshiro, in whom Maya confides, something she never does with Toichi, much to his anger (Kirino 2011a:346). Toichi therefore hopes that securing Maya's studies would make her fond of him (Kirino 2011b:35), and as a last desperate measure forces her into a contract binding them together and preventing Maya from seeing anyone else (Kirino 2011b:41). As could be expected, none of this makes Maya love Toichi. Moreover, she ultimately leaves Iwan-mura, ostensibly to pursue her studies, and never returns. In a twist of fate (a device typical of Kirino), *Poritikon*'s first part ends with Toichi encountering Maya as a hostess in a club run by the yakuza boss Kosugi, and he decides to sell her in order to repay his – and the village's – debts to the yakuza (Kirino 2011b:197). Kirino apparently employs this as a criticism of gender disparities in Japan, in that Maya's fate is decided so easily and without her consent, yet it is also this episode which provides the impetus for Maya's 'revenge', the novel's ultimate climax in the second part.

On the other hand, it is the Vietnamese Hoa who Toichi becomes bound to when he gets her pregnant. As a chairman and representative of the village – especially after deciding on "union" as the buzzword to promote the village – he finds himself obliged to marry her and remain in a relationship without love (Kirino 2011b:109), and he feels this lack to be mutual (Kirino 2011b:189). Yet he is

reminded by Alice that as a farmer of his age, he is not in a position to choose or expect another bride to come his way (Kirino 2011b:147). This is also the only marriage portrayed in the novel – and as is usual for Kirino, the marriage is not happy. The novelty is that the unhappiness of the marriage is conveyed from the male perspective, making this one of only few – if not the only – examples of such a perspective reversal within Kirino’s body of work to date. Typically, the unhappy marriages Kirino describes are to be contextualized as a result of patriarchy and its effects on women in Japan (such as in *OUT*) – and by extension, they might represent a familial system binding the women, something which they feel the need to liberate themselves from (as in *Yawaraka na hoho* or the short story “Sabiru kokoro”) – or they might underline the difference of other romantic and/or sexual relationships of her female protagonists (*Tamamoe!*, *Tōkyō-jima*). Here, Kirino gives voice to the men usually portrayed as the oppressors of her female characters. In this case, Toichi is pressured by society (both Iwan-mura and Japan) to conform to its standards and expectations in order to survive – that is, to remain a respectable representative of Iwan-mura. Considering his disastrous stay in Tōkyō and his previous life dedicated to the village, this is probably the only option he has.

4.2.1.3 Afterimage: Toichi, ten years later

In the second part of *Poritikon*, Toichi is portrayed from Maya’s perspective – therefore, readers are not privy to his own thoughts on his life anymore (although Kirino distances both protagonists from the readers somewhat by narrating in third person). This might be considered an instance of Kirino letting her readers fill in the blanks of the novel themselves, although in a different sense than, for instance, in the case of a missing closure (such as in *Yawaraka na hoho* or *Gurotesuku*). On the other hand, Maya reflects on her past in Iwan-mura numerous times, thereby providing a certain counterpoint to Toichi’s perspective on their relationship and the circumstances of the village life. Maya’s observation as an outsider is made even more subjective and one-sided in that Iwan-mura has obviously undergone a radical change, as has Toichi himself. Maya contemplates how Toichi has visibly gained weight, wealth and social status, and together with that also learned how to conceal his true feelings (Kirino 2011b:308). She also sees the “new” Toichi as a man who has earned much – a family, Iwan-mura and social status – and does not want to lose any of it. At the same time, this makes her realize how much of a disturbance she could be to Toichi, putting her in a position of power in their relationship (Kirino 2011b:315). Maya also learns about Toichi’s womanizing, now made possible by the arrival of young workforce in the village,

and the fact that his secretary Nao is in fact also his mistress; she imagines this as a possible “beginning of his downfall” (Kirino 2011b:317).

This downfall – Toichi being renounced as Iwan-mura’s chairman – actually comprises the climax of the novel’s plot, and is a direct effect of Maya’s confession to Alice that Toichi sold her to Kosugi (Kirino 2011b:304). During a meeting of the villagers, Toichi is reproached for privatizing and leading an extravagant life in a well-equipped, entirely air-conditioned mansion, while the other villagers are confined to single room apartments. He is also accused of treating the workers of a newly constructed pudding factory as slaves – who subsequently flee from the working conditions – while having sexual affairs with the female staff; Toichi’s argument of having an obligation to represent the village is ignored (Kirino 2001b:381). Subsequently, Kazuko is elected in his place as direct descendant of Raga Makoto – here, Kirino might be playing upon the lineage system of the Japanese monarchy – with Toichi’s son Kiichi as her successor, while Toichi is relegated to the outskirts of the village (Kirino 2011b:395). In a move that would not be out of place for a female Kirino protagonist, Toichi leaves the village for good with Maya, abandoning his family and children, arguing that he does not live for his children in the way Hoa does, concluding that “men and women are different” (Kirino 2011b:399).

It is somewhat problematic to perceive Toichi, *Poritikon*’s primary protagonist, as a character calling for readers’ identification. Although his position of an outsider in society is in line with many of Kirino’s other characters throughout her work, Toichi is portrayed as an extremely singular entity. He is used to an unconventional lifestyle; this holds true not only for the time he spends in a big city as represented by Tōkyō (with his failure to adapt forcing Toichi to return to Iwan-mura) as well as the years spent in the countryside, since he had been living in a commune all his life and is thus used to different patterns of day-to-day life and human relationships. It can thus be said that the issues he faces throughout the course of the novel stem from his inability to adapt to an environment the majority of Japanese live in. This contrasts with some of Kirino’s previous male characters, representing more familiar – even though often nonconformist – sociotypes (such as a *hikikomori*, shut-in, in *Tōkyō-jima*). This lineage of an ‘alien’ character is perhaps taken further with Ion, the protagonist of *Yasashii otona* (2010), a homeless young boy and a former subject of a communal experiment. On the other hand, Kirino describes Toichi in an interview with Sasaki Atsushi as “a small-minded man; the type I like” (Sasaki/Kirino 2011), giving the readers a hint on how to connect him to the majority of her male protagonists.

4.2.2 “Unbelievable loneliness”: Nakajima Maya

Poritikon's other protagonist, Nakajima Maya, is a character in many ways constructed as a counterpoint to Toichi, especially in the novel's first part portrayed through his perspective. It is in the second part that Maya is granted her own voice (along with her name being written in *kanji*, instead of *katakana* as in the first part), and it is here that Kirino further elaborates on her “otherness”, but also on a bond with Toichi, which appears to be so much as nonexistent in the first part. As an outsider and an eternal misfit (as will be described below), Maya provides a different perspective on utopia: Possibly also due to her being a female protagonist, she is much more in line with the ‘new’ and more critical utopian writing than the ‘typical’ male protagonist of classical utopias. At the same time, she stands for a more familiar ‘Kirino protagonist’ than Toichi.

As opposed to the “Iwan-mura purebred” (and by extension, a descendant of representatives of Japanese culture) Toichi, Maya is portrayed throughout *Poritikon*'s second part as a person with no home, uprooted from some unknown place of origin. She reflects on her father's heritage as a one-eighth Russian Korean, making her “one-sixteenth Russian, seven-sixteenth Korean and eight-sixteenth Japanese” (Kirino 2011b:296), with the possibility that her mother was in fact Korean as well, making her feel “as if it was her fate to be away from her homeland” (ibid.). Counting Maya's ethnicity in such minute numbers instead of just introducing Maya as a mixed Russian, Korean and Japanese appears to be Kirino's way of underlining the importance of ethnic otherness in Japanese society, particularly due to the negligible ratio of “one-sixteenth Russian”. Maya's Korean heritage cannot be considered unrelated to her portrayal as an eternal outsider – be it in Iwan-mura as a freeloader without having anything to contribute (Kirino 2011b:25), or quite literally as homeless in Sendai, sleeping on benches and washing her face on toilets (Kirino 2011b:217) – as Kirino herself is no stranger to tackling the issue of discrimination of the non-Japanese, or Japanese expatriates (cf. *OUT*, *Metabora*, *Gurotesuku*). Although discrimination based on her ethnicity is not an issue within the novel, her (not completely clear) heritage obviously contributes to Maya's feeling of homelessness. In a polar opposition to Toichi's attachment to Iwan-mura, Maya lacks a sense of belonging to any place, causing her to tell him that “we should quickly throw away (the place) where we were born” (Kirino 2011a:200).

Maya finds herself unable to adapt to Iwan-mura since, by her own admission, she finds the prospect of people living in a community with shared property ‘unbelievable’ and ‘strange’ (Kirino 2011a:202-203); on another occasion, she poses a rhetorical question whether all of the villagers aren't

just unhappy castaways like Kaneshiro (Kirino 2011b:73), essentially putting the reason of utopias' existence in question. Yet she and her 'brother' Akira enjoy the villagers' affection, in spite of everybody being aware their family is a sham – her “father” Kitada/Kunita and his “wife” Suon become indispensable workforce for the village, which allows Maya to freeload in the village and get her high school fees paid without any criticism raised (Kirino 2011b:25). As soon as the novel's narrative start to focalize from Maya's perspective in the second part, her life in Iwan-mura is described as follows:

When Maya lived in Iwan-mura, she didn't have a television, nor a bed or a desk. The only things in her room were a nappy *tatami*, a moist, hard bed (*senbeibuton*) and a sticky *zabuton*. In summer, insects would crawl out from between the gaps in the *tatami*. A snake was living in the broken bathtub, and she still had a pit toilet. In winter, she would wash her face with ice. Living this life, all grace had disappeared from Maya's life, she had dried up. She never wanted to return to Iwan-mura. (Kirino 2011b:203)

On other occasions, however, she is overcome by feelings of nostalgia, missing the years of living in “that old, poor village” (Kirino 2011b:264), while realizing that this very same village is gone for good after she witnesses its transformation into a ‘Disneyland’ on television (*ibid.*). It is because of this change, as well as Toichi's newfound status as a kind of celebrity that Maya realizes she became a “harmful presence to himself and the village” (Kirino 2011b:311), which denies her the opportunity to find something like a “home” in Iwan-mura for good. However, it appears home is not what Maya is searching for throughout the novel. In a stark contrast to Toichi's troubled relationship with Tōkyō, she finds living there desirable precisely because people do not care about each other in a big city, yet concluding that big city life is not lonely because people are everywhere around (Kirino 2011b:225).

It is also through Maya's sojourns in cities that Kirino explores the gender relations of the young Japanese. In an interview with Shigematsu Kiyoshi, Kirino quotes the psychologist Saitō Tamaki and speaks of concepts of ‘ownership’ and ‘relations’ in men and women, respectively, as the bases of romantic relationships. In Japanese society, this tendency manifests itself rather extremely with the concept of ‘owning a wife’, which Kirino considers inconceivable in the Western “couple culture” (Shigematsu/Kirino 2009/2012:100-101). Kirino also regards the relationships of the young Japanese to be superficial and lacking love, and by her own admission hopes they can learn from (fictional) stories (*monogatari*; Satō/Kirino 2009/2012:212). Unsurprising is Maya's portrayal as a *makeinu*²⁴ (“loser”)

²⁴ *Makeinu* (“loser”, literally “loser dog”) refers to single, childless women in their 30s or beyond. Women who choose the single lifestyle as well as those who haven't been able to find a husband in spite of their willingness are both labeled as such, reflecting the strong hold of patriarchy on Japanese society.

woman, also due to Kirino's perspective (as mentioned above) on these women as role models. Her downward spiral is already made evident during her stay in Iwan-mura, when she enrolls in a high school of dubious reputation (Kirino 2011a:300-301). Although she harbors an ambition to study informatics at the prestigious Keiō university (Kirino 2011b:70-71), this ultimately does not work out. In the second part of *Poritikon*, Maya is twenty-seven years old (which is, surely not coincidentally, Toichi's age at the novel's beginning) and working in progressively seedier establishments as a hostess due to her "high" age, realizing that "all she had was to be evaluated with men's values" (Kirino 2011b:251) and that "because she didn't know anything apart from serving customers, it was to be her fate to lose her value once and be left abandoned" (ibid.).

Much of said evaluation manifests itself in Maya's relationships with men portrayed throughout the novel, and as is usually the case in her work, Kirino paints an overtly critical picture of heterosexual relationships in Japan (and possibly the obsessive fixation on youth within Japanese society). It is important to note, though, that Maya is never shown looking for affection or love in the men she meets. In Sendai, she is not above sleeping with another high school student in order to have a place to stay at for three nights (Kirino 2011b:217) while being vocal about her dissatisfaction with the experience. In Yokohama, she is dating a well-off university graduate and wannabe singer Kazuki – three years her junior and described as having the face of a 'host'²⁵, shaved and styled eyebrows and brown hair in a perm (Kirino 2011b:244) – but seemingly only because his vanity and egocentrism provide her the comfort of not having to open herself up to anyone (Kirino 2011b:246-247). Kirino chooses to portray Kazuki – the novel's only representative of young, big-city men – as thoroughly unpleasant, particularly as a romantic partner. He is ragingly jealous, leading Maya to contemplate the unfavorable position of (young) women "played around by young men's jealousy and their monopolizing desire" (Kirino 2011b:269), and while breaking up with Maya in one such fit of jealousy, he calls her "trash of a woman" (*onna no kuzu*; Kirino 2011b:273).

Of course, the most important relationship in Maya's life is that with Toichi, and it is only in the novel's second part where her feelings towards him prove to be more complex than Toichi's perspective might have suggested. Maya reminisces about Toichi multiple times, recalling his unwavering interest in her as "so irritating she couldn't bear it" (Kirino 2011b:213), although at the same time regretting

²⁵ A "host" (*hosuto*) is a professional male companion, usually working in a so-called "host club" (*hosuto kurabu*), catering to the female customers paying for the host's companionship (it is, however, important to say that sexual services are officially illegal). As Kazuki's description suggests, hosts are associated with a specific image: The stereotypical host would be young, slim, with bleached, medium-length hair, dressed in suit and wearing any number of accessories.

deceiving Toichi of money he gave up for Maya's studies she ultimately doesn't pursue (ibid.). On another occasion, Maya admits she never understood the reason why Toichi would be drawn to her the way he was, while also being "frightened of her own attachment to him" (Kirino 2011b:226), from which she thinks Hoa's pregnancy will set her free (ibid.). While remembering her last meeting with Toichi's childhood friend Shōma the same night she was sold, she realizes that they all share the same problem: An utter lack of money and a sense of purposelessness. Out of these three young people, only Toichi has some measure of success in life, which itself could only come to him with the capital he earned by selling Maya (Kirino 2011b:339). And although Maya directly and significantly contributes to Toichi's fall from power in Iwan-mura, effectively driving him out of the village, it is this incident which ultimately brings them together. As they are leaving the village together for good, Maya realizes "she already trusted Toichi" (Kirino 2011b:409), and *Poritikon*'s final scene finds the pair leaving for Hokkaidō where Toichi wants to pursue a communal project similar to Iwan-mura, with Maya unhesitatingly agreeing to move with him (Kirino 2011b:412).

Kirino's portrayal of this young Japanese woman, then, is yet again a thoroughly ambivalent one. As could be expected, she voices criticism at Japan's gender disparities and the implicit patriarchy of Japanese society. Maya has practically no choice but to bow down to pressure in order to survive, even though she doesn't subscribe to the values of patriarchy. This refusal is underlined by her utter lack of interest in men and her defiant independence: Seemingly the only quality she pursues in the opposite sex is trustworthiness, which she ultimately, and questionably, finds in Toichi. The portrayal of Maya as a fiercely independent woman – or at least a woman fiercely struggling for independence, particularly from men – is important to mention within the framework of utopian literature, where gender roles remained largely unquestioned save for the 'new' utopias informed by feminism (see Chapters 3.1/3.1.1). This is perhaps also a motivation for Kirino choosing to supplement the novel with a second part from Maya's perspective. In an interview the author admits that she felt Maya received too little space during the novel's original magazine run and that because she wanted to express the emptiness inside Maya, she "couldn't help but write (about her) afterwards" (Sasaki/Kirino 2011).

Still, Kirino makes Maya's and Toichi's bond rather seem like one of two outcasts driven together by fate than one of lovers or even one of mutual understanding. This is actually in line with Kirino's portrayal of heterosexual relationships – Sasaki Atsushi describes the motif of mutual misunderstanding of men and women a *basso continuo* of Kirino's oeuvre, with *Poritikon* adding aspects of nationality and identity into the mix (Sasaki/Kirino 2011). Yet by making both protagonists utterly untypical

representatives of Japan's adults in their twenties or thirties, Kirino can also provide less of a commentary on this generation's situation (which is rather provided by the secondary characters). This might be a deliberate move on Kirino's part, considering her acknowledgment that she doesn't like to tackle social issues, but finds this unavoidable when writing about young people. It is also hard to read Toichi's and Maya's final escape as a happy ending, considering their mutual history and the fact that Toichi had an irreversible – and negative – impact on Maya's life. Kirino may therefore be making a rather somber statement on women's situation in Japan: With Maya, she might be illustrating the strength of the hold patriarchy still has on them, no matter how defiant or independent they might (aspire to) be. However, by claiming that Toichi and Maya “finally become Adam and Eve” (Sasaki/Kirino 2011), she offers another perspective on the ending. Here, Kirino might be referring to the ending of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), an epic poem dealing with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Tony Blackshaw interprets their life after Paradise as life after community, with the realization that if they are prepared to support one another and find Paradise between themselves, they might become happier than they once were in Eden (Blackshaw 2010:28-29).

4.3 A good place to live? Kirino Natsuo's construction of utopia

The following section aims to examine the presence of utopian narrative patterns in Kirino Natsuo's *Poritikon*, and thus position the novel within the discourse on utopian literature as described in Chapter 3. Among points of interest are Kirino's construction of a utopian community, the contexts in which the concept of utopia is being discussed within the novel, as well as the position of *Poritikon* within the frameworks of 'Western' and 'Japanese' utopias.

It can be said that the novel actually opens twice: In the prologue written from Maya's perspective, and in the first proper chapter, written from Toichi's perspective. Interestingly, the two openings feature classical utopian (Maya) and dystopian (Toichi) tropes on establishing a narrative, as discussed above. Maya is forced to flee to Iwan-mura with her mother's ex-boyfriend Kunita and a North Korean refugee Suon with her son Akira as a sham family after her mother is arrested in North Korea for transporting fugitives. Kunita recounts that he tried to enter Iwan-mura before when he was homeless, but was refused by Toichi due to his high age; his reasoning for this escape is that a family cannot be sent away as easily. He also assumes a fake identity under the name Kitada Minoru (Kirino 2011a:19). The “family” then embarks on a relatively lengthy travel (Kirino 2011a:21-24), the inclusion of which serves to establish

Iwan-mura as a remote place, and calls to mind the classic narrative device of a “journey to utopia”. On the other hand, Toichi’s first chapter opens *in medias res*, much in the same way as Moylan (2000:xiii) describes a typical establishing scene of a dystopian narrative (as discussed in Chapter 3.1.2): Opening *in medias res*, the narrative focuses on a subject that is part of the (dystopian) society, by which way the setting acquires an everyday quality. In this fashion, *Poritikon*’s first scene describes Toichi walking on a snowy landscape, until he finally arrives at Iwan-mura’s entrance and proceeds to remove ice and snow from its symbol, a three-meter long totem pole (Kirino 2011a:32-35) – which in itself might serve to establish Iwan-mura as a place of antiquated ideals, removed from the life of most Japanese. Kirino’s double establishment of the narrative suggests the contemporary closeness, if not outright inseparability of the utopian and dystopian. It is also interesting to note that the “utopian” opening is Maya’s and the “dystopian” one Toichi’s, while each of them is assigned the other “pole” within the utopian/dystopian spectrum on the *tankōbon* edition’s covers.

Iwan-mura is described as being founded in 1917 in Mabuchichō, in the prefecture of Yamagata, under the influence of Tolstoy’s Christian humanism and named after his short story *Ivan the Fool* (1886). There are three general rules to abide since Iwan-mura’s foundation: Unconditional love for others, prohibition of private property, and self-sufficiency; Iwan-mura is the only surviving utopian community from that time, alongside the real Atarashiki mura (which is mentioned in the novel as well). The founding members are Raga Makoto, a fictional writer belonging to the *Shirakaba-ha* group (see Footnote 20), and Takanami Sohō, a sculptor (Kirino 2011a:33-34). Of these two, it was only Takanami who would remain in Iwan-mura and devote himself to its growth, while Raga provided financial support for the village with his writing, living in Tōkyō (Kirino 2011a:36). The village’s symbol – the totem pole – is a joint work of the two, being sculpted by Takanami and containing the “Iwan-mura manifesto” written in Raga’s handwriting: “I live to love my friends, live to love the soil, live for the people” (Kirino 2011a:35).

When the plot begins in 1997, the village is home to twenty-two people (Kirino 2011a:44), most of them over fifty. Artistry is central to Iwan-mura’s existence: In spite of its economic hardship, artistic endeavor in the village “flourishes” (Kirino 2011a:49). This is also manifested through the village’s museum established by Raga, storing his writings and manuscripts, but also paintings and sculptures of Takanami Sohō and works of art by the village’s elderly artists, such as pottery, oil paintings or calligraphy (*ibid.*). The museum also houses a replica of Rodin’s “The Burghers of Calais”, and also serves as a display of the village’s history (Kirino 2011b:8). Iwan-mura also has its own theater troupe

called *Aiban*, supervised by the (at the novel's beginning) village's chairman, Toichi's father Soichi. The theatre troupe consists of villagers, but also has to accept outsiders as actors due to the villagers' age; it is also the reason for a young theatre enthusiast Kaneshiro Masaya to apply for a community membership (Kirino 2011a:50-51).

Apart from the members living in the village itself, there are also non-residential members, supporters sympathetic to the village's cause. While there have apparently been many of these during Raga's lifetime, their number has significantly diminished by the beginning of *Poritikon*'s plot (Kirino 2011a:45) and their role as financial supporters does not really have any real value to the village (Kirino 2011a:186). Iwan-mura also holds so-called "mutual criticism meetings" (*sōgō hihan-kai*) once a month, where village members are allowed to express frank and critical opinions on others – however, as far as Toichi himself can remember, the members would avoid fights and the meetings only feel as a mere obligation (Kirino 2011a:47).

It should be clear from the description above that Kirino's fictional Iwan-mura is closely modelled after Mushanokōji's Atarashiki mura, as much of the former's backstory mirrors that of the latter, as is evidenced by Chapter 4. Kirino even creates parallels as minute as mentioning a Rodin statue within the village, which attests to her detailed research. On another note, the utopian trope of ahistoricity and 'absence of genesis' is avoided completely by Kirino by modeling her utopian community after an existing one, as well as discussing Iwan-mura's genesis extensively within the novel itself. At the same time, constructing a fictional commune and fictional founder figures serves to make the link to Mushanokōji Saneatsu and Atarashiki mura appear ambiguous, since both communes are referred to within the novel as existing concurrently. This doubling calls to mind Kirino's treatment of factual bases for her other works, some of which (e.g. *Zangyakuki* and *Gurotesuku*) are obviously based on real events or works of fiction (e.g. *IN*), but operate either with fictional characters or alter said events slightly within their diegeses so as to still create original fiction, possibly lending these works a flair of objectivity in the process. Also, given Kirino's recurring theme of writers and writing (as illustrated in Chapter 2.2.3), it is possible to read Iwan-mura as an anachronistic extension of Raga's and Takanami's idealistic outlook on life which, considering Iwan-mura's problems and the novel's plot progression (both of which will be described below), has little place in contemporary Japanese society.

4.3.1 ‘Every silver lining has a cloud’: Iwan-mura’s problems

The existence of Iwan-mura is increasingly plagued by problems of economic nature, which become one of the novel’s most explicit manifestations of the impossibility to think of a utopian society completely removed from the society at large (in this case, Japan). At the beginning of the novel, Toichi ruminates upon the fact that the village cannot accept any new members due to its low production output, as it would collapse economically (Kirino 2011a:44). The flagship product of Iwan-mura are eggs, supplemented by *shiitake* mushrooms, *umeboshi*, homemade *miso* and other produce, while all members agree to donate their annual premiums to the village. Another source of income for the village is the revenue of the *Aiban* theatre troupe, which at some point would tour all over Japan and sell out performances every night – however, the troupe presently performs at the village assembly hall, with tourists or fans visiting, or at senior homes. Due to economic circumstances, the village has to rely on monetary income instead of doing barter trade as in the past, thus being forced to give up on the ideal of self-sufficiency (Kirino 2011a:57-58). Iwan-mura’s ban on private property applies to housing and land, as well as private savings, with the village’s revenue being split evenly among its members (Kirino 2011a:75); meals are served in exchange for meal tickets (Kirino 2011a:66). Iwan-mura’s forced relaxation of its rules is also well illustrated by the character of Toshima Ruriko, who has been admitted to the village in spite of being over the admission age limit of 45 years, because she had donated most of her retirement money, allowing Iwan-mura to buy a truck and make concrete flooring in the poultry house (Kirino 2011a:45-46).

Since Iwan-mura is not eligible for official subsidies and cannot apply for a loan as expressly as needed (Kirino 2011a:185-186), Toichi (as the new chairman) tries to raise money for the village in a number of ways. He pitches Iwan-mura’s eggs to a luxury grocery store chain (Kirino 2011a:406) and together with Kitada comes up with plans to promote tourism in Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:370). However, already early on, he considers less honest ways to make money, such as producing eggs of lesser quality and selling them as high-quality produce (Kirino 2011a:183). Most importantly, he gets mixed up with members of *yakuza*, selling discarded chickens (old ones which do not lay eggs anymore) as freerange ones (Kirino 2011a:432). It is this business with the *yakuza* which gets Toichi – and by extension, all inhabitants of Iwan-mura – in a debt, which is only repaid by selling Maya, as described above.

By constructing Iwan-mura as quite literally a poor place, Kirino reverts the utopian trope of the fictional utopia as a place of excess, or at least a place of order and sufficiency. This reversion, however,

could not be avoided if Kirino wanted to portray the problems of the Japanese countryside through *Poritikon*, and mediate an unsentimental, plausible picture of rural Japan's reality. Still, it is telling that Iwan-mura is not extrapolated from this harsh reality, and instead, Kirino chooses her "utopia" to struggle with the same problems as its 'un-utopian' surroundings, suggesting an inability to think of any utopian struggle and idealism without considering the outside world that forms it.

4.3.2 The dark side of equality: Homogeneity vs. heterogeneity

Given Kirino's prior portrayal of middle-aged to elderly women as strong and self-sufficient (e.g. in *OUT* and *Tamamoe!*), her description of the village's 'housewives' (poultry raising expert Hatakeyama Mikiko, Komatsu Fusae running the village dining hall and Toichi's mother Yaiko), all of them in their sixties or seventies as "holding the village up" (Kirino 2011a:71) does not come as a surprise. Kirino, however, is quick to add that the village would be lost without a younger generation to take it over, since the old villagers are slowly but surely becoming unable to work (ibid.). The people of Iwan-mura realize that aging and depopulation are not problems limited to the village, but affect all of the Japanese countryside. According to Alice – the second-youngest resident of the village at the novel's beginning – this issue is exaggerated in Iwan-mura because the village children get to feel the difference of their lifestyles while attending school, causing them to leave later on (Kirino 2011a:76-77). The difference in portraying the elderly as less capable of taking charge of their own lives (as in, for instance, *Tamamoe!*) might be rooted in Kirino's intention to write about problems specific to Japan. As mentioned above, this was a prominent motivation for her to situate the novel on Japan's countryside. While the middle-aged to elderly living in the cities mostly have their families – or at least an urban infrastructure – to rely upon (such as *Tamamoe!*'s protagonist Toshiko, who is in constant contact with either her children or her juniors, not to mention her relatively young age of 59 years), the Japanese countryside is quite literally dying out. After the population of Iwan-mura increases somewhat over the course of the plot, Toichi – as the newly appointed chairman – decides to put the village's bedridden, sickly or mentally deteriorating elderly to appropriate institutions in cities, effectively providing them care, yet still earning the grudge of some of the older residents (Kirino 2011b:18).

On the other hand, the village's residents are also portrayed as having difficulties with cultural or ethnic otherness, which becomes a key point in the development of the plot. The original representative of this conflict with otherness is Alice, who came into the village in the 1960s as a hippie, when Iwan-

mura was enjoying a period of fame as Japan's pioneering commune, along with Raga Makoto's granddaughter Kazuko (Toichi's biological mother) and others. She would be the only one from the group to remain in the commune, bearing two children, then eloping with a lover and leaving them to be raised by Yaiko, only to eventually return to Iwan-mura for good. The depopulation is actually given as a possible reason for Alice to remain in the village – the relationships are unchanging, calling to mind the “utopian stasis” (see Chapter 3). This can possibly provide comfort to Alice (and Toshima Ruriko), while devoting themselves to the community has become their reason for living (Kirino 2011a:52). Still, Toichi recounts that according to what he has heard of the village's history, first-generation resident Hatakeyama Katsuyuki and his son Shigeyuki would make an obstinate effort in trying to drive the hippies out of the village, with Shigeyuki openly disliking Alice even in the present (Kirino 2011a:56). This negative attitude does not only apply to Alice, but to her sons as well, with Shōma admitting to Toichi that they were “both treated as burden from the start” (Kirino 2011a:267) due to their ‘outsider’ origin, ingraining a mistrust for the village's ideals within the two boys since (ibid.).

This conflict with otherness becomes even more pronounced when the village experiences an increase of foreigners, starting with Kunita/Kitada's sham family – putting the village's ostensible homogeneity at stake. At one point, Suon complains to Toichi how she has trouble getting rice from villagers (even though she takes over the responsibility of cooking for the village) who would rather avoid her than voice their opinions clearly, concluding that “the Japanese don't like declining” (Kirino 2011a:239). Suon makes two acquaintances of hers come to Iwan-mura during Toichi's absence, which motivates him to come back from Tōkyō and become the village's chairman before Kunita/Kitada could manage to win over the trust of the residents (Kirino 2011a:302). One of these is the Vietnamese Hoa (Toichi's future wife), who had been previously married to a middle-aged Japanese farmer. The other one, Mei, is a Chinese disappointed by the Japanese family she had wed into, running away and surviving by working nighttime jobs (*mizu shōbai*). Suon even asks whether she could invite more women like this, which Toichi agrees to, with a tacit expectation of sexual favors in return (Kirino 2011a:355-356). The change this brings to Iwan-mura becomes obvious to Toichi during his father's funeral, when he sees almost exclusively foreign food prepared for the reception (Kirino 2011a:325); he is also faced with the mistrust the foreign women face from the older villagers, when Yaiko complains about how they “can't even burn incense properly” (Kirino 2011a:326). Also, in spite of their contribution to the village as active workers, there is a persistent worry that the women are staying in Japan illegally and could bring trouble to Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:389). Yet it becomes clear during the course of the plot that the

Japanese countryside – as exemplified by Iwan-mura – will have to become more diverse ethnically in order to survive. Upon her return to Iwan-mura in 2008, Maya witnesses a flock of young boys calling Suon ‘mom’, making the impression of looking “like Suon’s children” (Kirino 2011b:318). Toichi’s half-Vietnamese family itself makes the acceptance of otherness, which Kirino seems to be advocating, seem inevitable. Both Suon and her son Akira reveal to Maya that they only want to idle away in Iwan-mura after Toichi’s resignation from the chairman’s position (Kirino 2011b:393/395), possibly hinting at a difficulty to their adjusting to the mainstream Japanese society, well-known for its issues of discrimination against Koreans – which is precisely what Kirino might be criticizing. For Korean refugees, Iwan-mura becomes a safe and peaceful place – a magazine article in the novel describes the new ‘Heisei²⁶ Iwan-mura’ as a “place of refuge for weak, oppressed people ... the face of a new utopia” (Kirino 2011b:9). Despite that, even here, the non-Japanese characters are made to feel as outsiders. This “conflict with otherness” can be read as a critical treatment of the utopian myth of egalitarianism and equality – yet the ‘elimination of undesirable elements’ which Christopher Ferns speaks of (1999:90) proves hard in order for the village (and by extension, possibly the Japanese countryside in general) to survive. The point of “otherness” is, however, also brought about by the chapters detailing Toichi’s life in Tōkyō, portrayed quite literally as ‘hell’ (due to the intense, inescapable heatwave described in these particular sections of the novel) and a dystopian place of perpetual struggle for survival and nonacceptance of outsiders – in this case, Toichi, as described above. It can be thus said that Iwan-mura does not serve as a counterpoint to the society the author might aim to criticize – rather, Kirino portrays the problem of intolerance as pertaining to all of Japan, utopias included.

4.3.3 Toichi, the (not so) charismatic leader

Another key conflict within Iwan-mura is rooted in Toichi’s succession of Soichi as the village’s chairman and his problematic leadership, with the deep disagreement of the villagers about Toichi’s choices eventually causing the village to split in two factions. However, it is clear that Soichi – the previous “charismatic leader” of Iwan-mura – is not exactly a managerial type and probably contributed to Iwan-mura’s economic downfall himself, yet is universally loved by the villagers. Soichi admits that he is not fond of physical labor and a life bound to the soil like the one his father, Iwan-mura’s founder

²⁶ Heisei is the current (2014) era in Japan, according to the calendar scheme which identifies a respective era with the reign of a respective emperor, carrying his posthumous name. The Heisei era started in 1989, replacing the previous Shōwa era (1926-1989).

Sohō led, and that basically all he cares about is theatre (Kirino 2011a:63). On another occasion, he explains to Toichi that a (good) leader displays his selfish desires, be manly and attractive to women – all of which are qualities he apparently is endowed with and which allowed Iwan-mura to “bloom to a wonderful utopia” (Kirino 2011a:167). Alice describes Soichi to Toichi as a womanizing good-for-nothing who never did any farming nor housework, and that the village was enjoying loose sexual morals during his prime, saying that “you became dirty when you were in Iwan-mura. Everybody was running around in the night” (Kirino 2011a:100-101). Later, she explains the villagers’ disdain towards Toichi as a result of the older villagers forgetting their own youth, saying that she and Raga Kazuko went through something similar in the past (Kirino 2011b:180).

One of the problems about Toichi’s leadership is his lack of authority, which is displayed constantly throughout *Poritikon*. In spite of his hunger for power, he often needs advice, assistance, or just does not have the power to move the other villagers towards a common goal. The ‘outsider’ farmer Yamaji Hiroshi – who becomes a “charismatic leader” for the village in his own right (as described below) – proposes that Toichi should become, in a way, a spokesperson for Iwan-mura, a “charismatic chairman ... a charismatic leader of Japan’s agriculture” (Kirino 2011b:82). Another character with a clear conception of Iwan-mura’s future, Tachibana Yūsuke, is introduced late into the novel as an enthusiastic sympathizer (along with his wife Chisa) to Toichi’s cause. However, he soon becomes a threat to Toichi’s authority, pushing his ideals of organic farming which would probably be successful with Yamaji and the older villagers as well; but even with someone like Yūsuke ostensibly on his side, Toichi feels out of the picture of Iwan-mura’s future (Kirino 2011b:193-194). The only person who seems to be a sincere ally of Toichi’s, providing him with advice throughout, is Kunita/Kitada, for instance when he discusses Toichi’s lack of moving ideals as a possible reason for the villagers not understanding him, and therefore not supporting him as the chairman (Kirino 2011b:106).

It is actually Kunita/Kitada’s lung cancer and subsequent death which prompt Maya to visit him in hospital, and by that way also Iwan-mura ten years after she had left. His funeral is one of the moments she realizes how drastically the village had changed (this change will be described in more detail below). During this time, Kunita/Kitada obviously becomes an integral part of the village, and Toichi’s lack of authority comes through clearly when he becomes unable to secure the funeral within the village. He apologizes for this to Kunita/Kitada in his funeral speech, as well as calling him a ‘sworn friend’, a ‘true farmer’, and a ‘comrade’ who could understand Toichi and his ideals, even saying that “Kitada-san lived for Iwan-mura, and he died for Iwan-mura” (Kirino 2011b:367). Ironically, Toichi harbors a deep

mistrust towards Kunita/Kitada at first, even sending him away on his first attempt for membership. However, he is portrayed from the start as a wise person, educated in matters of utopia and utopian communities, something which Soichi points out to Toichi during the first visit of Kunita/Kitada's sham family (Kirino 2011a:66-67). Yaiko even claims Kunita/Kitada would make a good chairman, a conclusion to which she apparently comes during Toichi's absence; Toichi is quick to point out his status of an 'outsider' (Kirino 2011a:333).

4.3.4 Charismatic and unyielding: Figures of authority and Iwan-mura's split

With the character of Kunita/Kitada, the traditional utopian trope of a dialogue wherein a utopian 'insider' convinces the 'traveler' about the superiority of his or her respective utopian society is reversed. Kunita/Kitada is obviously much more knowledgeable in terms of utopia than Toichi is (or for that matter, possibly any of the village's present members), and provides him advice in matters of leadership or group psychology, among other things, in numerous passages of the novel. Kirino might be making a slight nod to his education about utopias (over the course of the novel, he gives references to Robert Owen, Tolstoyanism etc.) when Kunita/Kitada claims he used to be a cartographer by occupation (calling to mind Christopher Ferns' assessment that the traveler figure has been replaced by one of a tourist after the 'age of exploration'), work that has been since made obsolete by modern technologies (Kirino 2011a:43). By the same token, utopias are obsolete in the modern world – Iwan-mura being a prime example – and Kunita/Kitada seems to be aware of this, as he never claims any utopia to be superior to 'traditional' society. Yet the devotion with which he works for the village shows that he believes an alternative society can be made to work properly. Kunita/Kitada can thus be said to embody a voice of a 'critical utopia', understanding utopias as works in progress as opposed to a final solution (see Chapter 3.2.1)

Another character who acts as a counterpoint to Toichi – as a possible leader with charisma and natural authority – is Yamaji Hiroshi, a fifty-four year old farmer living autonomously on the outskirts of Iwan-mura with his wife, pursuing organic farming and with a reputation of an eccentric (Kirino 2011a:223-224). Making Yamaji the same age as Kitada/Kunita might be Kirino's way to accentuate his leadership qualities and charisma, which they both share but ultimately exploit in very different ways. The reputation of the Yamajis is that of ascetics, reminiscent of Iwan-mura's first settlers who came along with Takanami Sohō and the Japanese writer Miyazawa Kenji. Contributing to this is also their

lifestyle centered around rice cultivation, while both abstain from drinking or smoking and wear only the most basic clothing (Kirino 2011a:372). Yamaji first makes his appearance in the novel during a mutual criticism meeting where the succession of the dining hall and Soichi's chairman position are being discussed, and immediately earns an applause from the villagers, speaking about the village's need to accept young members (Kirino 2011a:225). In spite of Yamaji's modest demeanor and image, however, it quickly becomes clear that he is not quite honest with the other villagers. Toichi notices that Yamaji enjoys special treatment from the others, using village equipment for his own ends – effectively breaking the village's rules – without any repercussions (Kirino 2011a:383); slowly but surely, Toichi also notices that the Yamajis seem to live much more comfortably than the rest of Iwan-mura (Kirino 2011a:399).

These worries are later confirmed by Maya, who gets on good terms with the Yamaji couple. Toichi realizes that these 'ascetics' sell brand rice, own a cell phone and a computer and trade online (among other things) without the rest of the village knowing anything (Kirino 2011b:28), leading Toichi to think of their house as "the Dejima²⁷ of Iwan-mura" (Kirino 2011b:29). Yet Yamaji never enters a conflict with any of the original villagers except Toichi, even when the latter makes them aware of the aforementioned disparities – on the contrary, he manages to gain the older villagers' sympathies, effectively splitting Iwan-mura into two factions. Kitada explains to Toichi that Yamaji can gain their trust because he has clear ideals which they can understand, something that he has not been able to achieve, and that in spite of idealism being something 'antiquated', it can apparently still move people (Kirino 2011b:107-108).

Yamaji actively contributes to Iwan-mura's split when he starts to call Toichi and his 'allies' spending time together in the village's assembly hall the 'assembly hall group' (*shūkaishitsu-ha*). It is important to note that this group consists of almost all of the village's younger members and representatives of the aforementioned 'otherness' (Toichi, Kunita/Kitada, Suon, Hoa, Mei and Akira; possibly Maya), which underlines the notion of a future of the Japanese countryside as more ethnically diverse, as well as Kirino's criticism of ostracizing the 'otherness' by the elderly generation (Kirino 2011b:87). The concept of diversity is only made more obvious on a semantic level by Kirino's decision to base the group in an assembly hall (*shūkaishitsu*), alluding to their 'coming together'. Kirino ironically proceeds to point out the backwardness of the conservative, older faction of the village when Kunita/Kitada dubs it the 'museum group' (*bijutsukan-ha*) in jest (Kirino 2011b:91) due to their secret

²⁷ Dejima was a small island located outside Nagasaki, which during the Edo period (1600-1868) – and therefore, Japan's period of isolation – served as the sole trading post between Japan and the outside world. Dejima was also the only place where the foreign merchants allowed in Japan lived.

meetings in the village museum, even though free entry is forbidden according to the village rules (Kirino 2011b:96). The association of the older, or more conservative generation with the museum also suggests Kirino's critical take on the 'utopian stasis', and the reluctance of this group to allow any substantial change to the village's existence, which might be manifested by the existence of the museum in itself (as described in Chapter 4). This antagonistic depiction of an elderly generation might also come off as somewhat surprising in the context of Kirino's oeuvre, considering her often positive and empowering depictions of seniority, or her strong middle-aged (usually female) protagonists. The only exception to this grouping is Alice, who refuses to side with either faction (Kirino 2011b:97), although she ultimately contributes to Toichi's denouncement at the end of *Poritikon*. Although Toichi is at first unwilling to participate in any sort of fight (Kirino 2011b:87), he finally succumbs to the splitting and divides the poultry house by painting a black demarcation line inside (Kirino 2011b:140), letting both factions work for themselves.

4.3.5 The new utopia: Iwan-mura's revamp and future outlook

In *Poritikon*'s first part, the ultimate fate of Iwan-mura is left open, although it does not end on an altogether hopeless note after the arrival of the organic farmer enthusiast Tachibana Yūsuke and his wife Chisa, who propose to contribute to building a new "Heisei Iwan-mura" (Kirino 2011b:132). Iwan-mura's subsequent change is witnessed from Maya's perspective in *Poritikon*'s second part, first in television, then through a personal visit, which ultimately leads to Toichi abandoning Iwan-mura for good.

Maya's first sight of the 'new' Iwan-mura is during Toichi's interview for television, commenting on the village's success with organic farming and provision of free-range chickens, wearing clothes for farming work and a white t-shirt with 'Iwan-mura' printed on it to look like ink calligraphy. The shot of Toichi then changes to a scene of rice planting, with two smiling young men unknown to Maya helping Toichi out; ironically, Maya is watching this interview with Kawazoe, the yakuza member she ended up with after being sold, and with whom she would later have an affair (Kirino 2011b:253-254). In 2008, she meets Kosugi, the man to whom Maya was sold to, who explains to her that Toichi made Iwan²⁸-mura a farming corporation after having success with brand organic vegetables, while also turning the

²⁸ Now written in *katakana*, that is, いわん村 instead of 唯腕村 – possibly to reflect its "modernization", but also obscuring the meaning of the *kanji* ("just" or "only" and "arm" or "skill", respectively), making the village's transformation evident.

village into an “agricultural Disneyland” (Kirino 2011b:263) after experiencing an intense interest in Iwan-mura as a tourist spot, letting children try out farming for themselves (ibid.). In the meantime, Iwan-mura has also become famous for its so-called Iwan Egg Pudding (*Iwan no tamago purin*), made from local free-range eggs and sold exclusively in the village in matryoshka-shaped bottles – which gain popularity as collector’s items online themselves (Kirino 2011b:266).

Maya’s first “taste” of this new Iwan-mura comes through a poster she sees at a train station on her way there. The poster shows the totem pole, a chicken farm and two young women holding bamboo baskets full of leaf vegetables, while a blurb on the poster reads “A utopian village with a flavor of *Shirakaba-ha*. Hand-grown organic vegetables and free-range eggs. Try out farming yourself!” (Kirino 2011b:285). She also reads a promotional leaflet distributed by the local tourist information center – this leaflet shows a photograph of old snowshoes and portraits of Raga Makoto and Takanami Sohō (dubbed “Iwan-mura’s ancestors”; ibid.), associating the blurb ‘hand-made warmth’ with the snowshoes, about which Toichi – also portrayed on the leaflet – speaks. He explains that these old, hand-made snowshoes are still being used in Iwan-mura, adding that “in fact, they have a perfect shape and are very comfortable. Many practical things come from abroad now, but there’s nothing that could surpass the warmth and wisdom in hand-made things” (ibid.). In spite of Iwan-mura’s drastic modernization, then, an emphasis on the “traditional” and “old” still seems like a viable selling point, catering to the taste for nostalgia or a “golden age” – such nostalgia being a utopian moment upon itself.

The first villagers Maya meets after her departure are Suon and Alice, who relay to her their positive experience with Iwan-mura’s evolution. Suon says the villagers now live in prefab apartments, while Hoa lives in a large mansion and the assembly hall is being shown to tourists as a historical building (Kirino 2011b:289). There are also many people commuting from the neighboring town(s) to work in the pudding factory, and due to the influx of people to the village, a tourist bus stop, public toilets and a convenience store have been built. Alice claims the village is doing better than before, and that she herself is employed in the pudding factory as well (Kirino 2011b:302).

The possibilities for tourists’ activities in Iwan-mura are described as well. Visitors usually come by bus, get off at the totem pole, learn about the history of Iwan-mura and proceed to visit the museum, where they are shown Takanami’s paintings and sculptures and Raga’s handwritten manifesto. Then they visit the village’s old houses to commemorate the founders’ achievements and get a ‘taste of life’ in the Meiji (1868-1912) and Taishō (1912-1926) eras. After that, the tourists can visit the vegetable farm and pull out some vegetables from the soil, or pluck fruits; during the rice-planting season, it is possible to

try planting Yamaji's rice. From the free-range chicken farm, they can buy the famous Iwan-mura eggs and the pudding. They can enjoy meals made from local produce in the farm's organic restaurant, which even produces its own beer. Last but not least, the village has its own souvenir shop selling t-shirts, merchandise with the totem pole design or reproductions of paintings, ceramics or calligraphy from the village's elderly artists (Kirino 2011b:327-328). Toichi explains this massive success as having luck, with the village taking opportunity of emergent booms such as the slow food movement or popularity of organic produce (Kirino 2011b:328). The heavy reliance on 'iconography' and symbols also calls to mind the fundamental role of imagery in construction of a community, as mentioned in Chapter 3.3.2.

Yet Maya also witnesses the darker sides of Iwan-mura's success, most strikingly when she visits the Komatsu dining hall after Kunita/Kitada's funeral. She sees a number of women her age, with sour expressions on their faces, visibly exhausted, who apparently work at the village's pudding factory or the village farm. At that moment, Maya realizes that these young people are entirely unaffected by Kunita's death, and that the village itself is in fact something completely different than what the poster promised (Kirino 2011b:341). Toichi himself is reproached by Alice that the workers at the pudding factory are treated as slaves, and that the village constantly has to look for new workforce because the workers usually flee from the working conditions, while Yamaji's wife Michiko accuses Toichi of sexual harassment of the female staff (Kirino 2011b:381). Maya also experiences verbal sexual harassment herself during her visit to Iwan-mura while serving drinks, unable to shake the feeling "like she was working in the pub in Sakuragi-chō" (Kirino 2011b:371), suggesting that even within this utopian society, gender disparities are still an issue – if not even more than during her original stay. It then becomes evident that Kirino subverts the utopian patterns of *iyashi* ("healing") present in much of Japanese literature of the past two decades, staying in line with her previous work, most notably *Metabora*. Neither of the two constructions of Iwan-mura comes off as particularly paradisiacal – starting with its location in a harsh climate (it is telling that Kirino "moved" the commune from Kōchi on the island of Shikoku to the snowy Yamagata, practically opposite of the real Atarashiki mura) to all trials and tribulations the protagonists experience therein. Even if Kazuko's motivation to move back might suggest just such "healing" potential of living in the "new" Iwan-mura, Kirino offsets this with the somber image of exhausted factory workers. Kirino's portrayal of the 'new face of utopia' is even more ambivalent than that of the community that came before it. On the one hand, Iwan-mura manages to overcome economic hardship and find great success, securing a constant living standard for its members, or in Toichi's case, even luxury. This success, however, comes at a price: The relationships become impersonal or outright

strained (as Toichi's unhappy marriage or his subsequent denouncement exemplify), with economic success seemingly being the only acceptable 'ideal' in contemporary Japan. The utopia of old is as much as dead – as becomes manifest by Kunita/Kitada's death – and can presently only serve as a product to be consumed. This consumption can take on the form of a pudding or a short visit, which does not require the tourists to think about the (originary) society they live in from a critical perspective – an impulse under which utopian communities, including Iwan-mura, have been founded. Toichi's mother Kazuko – who ultimately becomes the village's chairwoman in his place – moves back to Iwan-mura, her motivation being that the village provides ample opportunities for work and the healthy environment might help her get cured of her alcoholism. This also points to Iwan-mura's new comfortable living standard as an important factor for living there (Kirino 2011b:373). On the other hand, utopia does not seem completely 'dead', as the novel's ending suggests: Toichi and Maya leave Iwan-mura together, but ultimately decide to build a new community on Hokkaidō – in other words, the only choice they seem to have in a world where they are both unable to find a place for themselves is to create a world of their own. Whether that is a good or bad decision remains – in true Kirino fashion – open.

The emphasis on the village's organic farming, healthy environment and exploitation of booms such as slow food reads positively 'ecotopian' (see Chapter 3.1.1), while also rooting the novel in global, contemporary reality and possibly suggesting a way for farming communities to survive. Kirino's setting of an agricultural community in Japan's countryside would be in line with Laurence Davis' proposition of "grounded utopias" as utopias which might still contribute to some kind of social change by presenting alternative lifestyles (as discussed in Chapter 3) – were it not for Kirino's decision to effectively turn Iwan-mura into a thoroughly capitalist corporate entity, complete with a factory – something the "grounded utopias" should be an alternative to. This is much more in line with Ramoneda's (2011) interpretation of a contemporary society as one of financial companies as rulers and citizens as consumers (Locations 3198-3202), contributing to a crisis in utopian thinking and, by extension, the relevance of utopias. Coming back to the Tolstoy reference, it seems that farming is not the most honorable profession anymore, and no Japanese "Ivan" is going to rule the country ever again.

5. Conclusion

With *Poritikon*, Kirino Natsuo proves herself as a writer willing to step outside of her comfort zone and continuously reinvent her writing and themes, while, at the same time, staying true to her ongoing concern of creating fiction addressing Japan's current social issues. By largely situating her novel in a previously unfamiliar setting, Kirino manages to take up different issues pertaining to Japanese society, while employing many of her recurrent tropes so as not to alienate her established readership. This also allows Kirino to address ongoing concerns of her work, such as persistent gender discrimination or the trials and tribulations of the lower social strata. Kirino remains ambivalent in her portrayal of a fictional utopia: She introduces Iwan-mura as a commune in a critical state on the brink of dissolution, yet even the 'new face of utopia', as presented in *Poritikon*'s second part, is a far cry from a truly ideal solution.

With *Poritikon*, Kirino Natsuo employs the genre patterns for which she had been known previously only scarcely. She might be making a small nod to her past as a mystery writer by introducing several disappearances within the novel's plot (all resolved and not integral to the plot's development), but there is no mystery to speak of. Describing the novel as *joryū bungaku* is problematic – while Kirino does take up women's issues by making Maya the protagonist of the second part, these are obviously not the novel's focus as long as the narrative is focalized on Toichi. Importantly, she subverts her status as a writer of new proletarian literature by constantly questioning the (decidedly proletarian) values of Iwan-mura's founding generation and their place in the contemporary world. In general, it is then fair to say that Kirino is treading new ground as a novelist, while at the same time portraying characters that are easily identifiable as "Kirino characters". As for positioning *Poritikon* within the utopian spectrum, discussed at length in Chapter 3, it seems fair to call the novel anti-utopian due to Kirino's thoroughly critical treatment of Iwan-mura's ideals and utopia itself, while never advocating supremacy of one social system (utopian community and the outside world, respectively) over the other, making descriptions of *Poritikon* as 'pure' utopia or dystopia complicated. Rather, Kirino chooses to emphasize the connection of the two social systems and the impossibility of any utopian system to fully isolate itself from the society which it was born out of. Toichi seems to be the victim of the village's stubborn tendency for such isolation, making him unable to find his place in the village due to the generation gap, nor in the outside world (represented by Tōkyō) due to living a completely different life from his peers. By way of such thorough ambivalence, Kirino successfully avoids the pitfalls of 'prescriptive qualities' so often criticized about utopian writing. In Tom Moylan's terms, then, *Poritikon* could also be considered – at

least partly – a “critical utopia”, in that it strongly operates with a sense of utopia as a ‘work in progress’, complete with hardships that this process entails. Iwan-mura might be a society to which the argument of a ‘utopian stasis’ applies, but is forced to confront change in order to survive – be that accepting foreigners or reinventing itself completely in exchange for economic profit, which in itself is not presented as a ‘happy ending’.

On the other hand, it seems out of place to position *Poritikon* within the framework of a Japanese utopian tradition (Chapter 3.3) – the problematic assessment of such tradition notwithstanding – as the novel obviously seems much more inspired by Western utopian writing. What becomes clear from researching Japanese utopian literature is that it is a fringe genre within the Japanese literary market, much like the sub-genre of ‘female hard-boiled’ Kirino made her literary debut with. This speaks positively for her willingness to break free from any given label as an author, as well as broaden the horizons of her writing – and judging by the lukewarm reception of utopian novels by established authors, as discussed in Chapter 3.3 – also risk disappointing sales. But then, considering Kirino’s own skepticism towards the potential of literature for causing significant social impact, she might not be constructing a utopia to change anything after all.

The scope of this thesis does not allow to take into account all elements of *Poritikon* in depth, some of which have been mentioned previously and might inspire further research, particularly given Kirino’s relevance on Japanese and international literary markets. The novel’s literary references, specifically to the *Shirakaba-ha* group and Leo Tolstoy (and by extension, the philosophy of ‘Tolstoyanism’) have only been mentioned briefly, but given Kirino’s ongoing interest in the themes of (Japanese) writers and writing (see Chapter 2.2.3), both of them might be worthy of a closer look.

Poritikon also is not the only Kirino novel to utilize elements of utopian/dystopian fiction or the theme of community: Her 2008 novel *Tōkyō-jima* (“Tokyo Island”) deals with a group of castaways on an unknown and deserted island – most of them young Japanese men, with the exception of a middle-aged woman Kiyoko (arguably the novel’s central character) and her husband. The situation becomes even more complicated after a group of able-bodied Chinese men strand on the same island and tensions start to develop. The novel’s premise calls to mind works such as William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which has been interpreted as an unorthodox take on dystopian fiction (Kumar 1987:404). With *Tōkyō-jima*, Kirino chooses to address issues relevant to contemporary Japan as represented by her largely ‘outsider’ cast of people underprivileged in the mainstream of Japanese society: A middle-aged woman (exploiting her sexuality for the sake of power), a *hikikomori* (a chronic shut-in), *freeters*

(freelance workers without full-time employment), ethnic ‘others’ (the Chinese and a group of Filipino women) etc. The novel could thus be interpreted as an observation on new ways of life inevitably overtaking Japan, particularly given its ambivalent epilogue from the point of view of twins born on the island, one remaining and one living in Tōkyō. Here, Kirino envisions a new society starting anew, populating a previously deserted island.

Another Kirino novel utilizing more dystopian, post-apocalyptic elements is *Yasashii otona* (“Kind Adults”; 2010), which takes place in an unspecified, near future in Tōkyō. After a major economic breakdown of Japan, the metropolis becomes deserted and is populated largely by groups of homeless people, among them the novel’s sole protagonist, a teenage boy named Ion. The novel follows Ion’s steps through the decaying city, his encounters with various groups (homeless single mothers, male ‘soldiers’ living underground), as well as the search for his origins, in which he is aided by a friendly NGO street worker. *Yasashii otona* does not take place in contemporary Japan, making its setting unusual for a Kirino novel. However, given the common interpretation of dystopian fiction as the projection of present into the future, she might be portraying the Japanese metropolis in a state of decay to which it is headed here and now. Other possible interpretations might include the faltering perspectives for Japan’s youth, or Japan’s ‘identity crisis’ as expressed through the homelessness of (seemingly most) Tōkyō’s dwellers. Both of these novels (not coincidentally serialized and released in book form during or around the time of *Poritikon*’s magazine serialization) can thus be seen as examples of Kirino utilizing utopian/dystopian tropes as vehicles for commentary on contemporary social issues, and serve as further testaments to the versatility of her writing.

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²⁹ From here on, the edition referred to in square brackets is the first *bunko* (paperback) edition. The first listed year refers to the original *tankōbon* (hardback) publication, the second to the *bunko* edition used.

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Abstract (Deutsch)

In der vorliegenden Masterarbeit wird Kirino Natsuos Roman *Poritikon* („Politikon“, 2011) analysiert: Einerseits wird untersucht, inwiefern der Roman verschiedenen Mustern von Kirinos vorherigen Werken entspricht (Umgang mit Genres, Figurendarstellung, Themen, Botschaften oder Kritik), andererseits wird der Roman aus der Perspektive der utopischen, bzw. dystopischen Literatur untersucht. Zu diesem Zweck werden Kirinos Werk, wie auch das Genre der Utopie/Dystopie ausführlich geschildert und in weiterer Folge am Fallbeispiel *Poritikon* analysiert. Das Anliegen ist, Kirinos Werk als Genre- und thematisch umfangreicher als üblich darzustellen (in dem sie oft als Krimiautorin betrachtet wird), wie auch den Roman vorzustellen, in dem utopische Literatur nicht zu den populärsten und üblichsten Genres der japanischen Literatur gehört.

Abstract (English)

The focus of this thesis is an analysis of Kirino Natsuo's novel *Poritikon* (“Politikon”, 2011). The thesis follows two major threads: *Poritikon* as a Kirino Natsuo novel and a presence of motifs present in her prior work (such as her handling of genre/s, portrayal of characters, themes, messages or criticism), as well as a utopian or dystopian novel. To this end, the thesis is introduced by extensive chapters on Kirino's oeuvre and the utopian/dystopian literature, respectively, followed by an analysis of *Poritikon* from these two angles. It is my concern to introduce a broader perspective on Kirino Natsuo's writing (as she is often regarded as an author of crime fiction), as well as introduce the novel as an interesting example of her writing, since utopian literature is an untypical, or not the most popular genre within the literary landscape of Japan.

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