



Yosano Akiko, the New Woman, and Words in Defiance of War.

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Abstract:

This article examines the works of Japanese woman author Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), who is widely recognized for her feminist ideas and her bold female voice in modern Japanese literature. The article highlights Akiko's courageous stance in challenging patriarchal views by showcasing her poetry, which expresses her love for her family, particularly her younger brother, her activism for Japanese women's rights within the New Woman movement, and her feminist ideas through her contributions to *Seitō* magazine. The focus also includes her poem "Thou Shalt Not Die," which is analyzed through a Hindi translation since it has not been previously examined. This demonstrates how cross-cultural literary exchange can broaden Akiko's reach into new linguistic and cultural regions, such as South Asia. The study highlights translation as a key method for extending the educational influence of Japanese feminist literature beyond both national and language boundaries.

Keywords:

Yosano Akiko; New Woman; feminist poetry; *Seitō*; Japanese modernism; gender and nationalism; translation studies; Hindi-Japanese literary exchange; Thou Shalt Not Die

Yosano Akiko's Poetry and Feminist Critique:

Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) is one of the most celebrated Japanese poets. She is known for her modernist style, feminist beliefs, and profound emotional expressions of female love. Her literary career bridges three Japanese eras (Meiji 1868–1912, Taishō 1912–1926, and Shōwa 1926–1989). During this time, she published more than two dozen collections of poetry, along with many essays and fictional works. Akiko's writing offered bold insights into the nature of love, social norms, and gender roles that challenged Japanese traditional forms of literature. Noriko Horiguchi defines Akiko as "(1) an innovator of modern poetry who challenged the tradition of Japanese poetry; (2) a woman writer who expressed the truth, freedom, and beauty of the modern self and womanhood; (3) an individualist or liberal feminist who challenged the state's protection of their reproductive capacity; and (4) a promoter of peace who resisted militarism" (2012, XXII). In other words, during the transformative Japanese eras of the early twentieth century, marked by swift modernization and strong nationalism, Yosano Akiko emerged as a notable literary voice,

courageously critiquing state policies through her poetry. Akiko's poetry not only explored personal and feminist themes but also addressed pressing socio-political issues, marking her as a vocal critic of government policies during the Meiji era. This essay begins with an overview of Akiko's works, before delving into her involvement with the 'New Woman' movement and her anti-war perspectives. Finally, this essay explores Akiko's renowned poem '*Thou Shalt Not Die*' through a Hindi translation, demonstrating how linguistic and cultural exchanges can foster greater interest among language learners and cultural enthusiasts, particularly as this significant work is still not widely available in Hindi.

Akiko's work in poetry is widely discussed, particularly her early collection *Midaregami* (Tangled Hair, 1901). Akiko's *Midaregami* not only conveyed bold perspectives on femininity but also quietly contested the Meiji-era ideals of female passivity upheld by the government. She is also recognized for her essays that picked up on the themes of women's struggles, of which *Bosei hogo ronsō* (Controversy Over the Protection of Motherhood, 1916–1919) is the best known. The popularity of Akiko's poetry and essays in Japan led to her works being translated and researched worldwide: her Poetry and the female voice by Janine Beichman (2002); her Poetry and female identity by Leith Morton (2014); her Poetry and notions of motherhood and childbirth by Amanda Seaman (2016) and Vera Mackie (2003); her poetry and ideas about war, by Steve Rabson (1991) and Joshua Fogel (2001); and her poetry and discussions of women's bodies and imperialism, by Noriko Horiguchi (2012). In general, Laurel Rasplica Rodd and Rebecca Copeland provide a unique understanding of Akiko's works. These critical responses collectively demonstrate that Akiko's poetry was not only aesthetically influential but also profoundly ideological, thereby paving the way for her more overtly feminist work through platforms such as *Seitō*, where her poetic voice emerged as a symbol of the ascending New Woman.

Awakening the 'New Woman': Akiko's Contributions to *Seitō* Magazine:

Akiko's participation in the magazine *Seitō* further illustrated her defiance against the traditional patriarchal norms upheld by the Meiji state. During early twentieth century Japan, women had not yet gained legal rights including voting. They were considered subordinate to men and were expected to be "quiet and reserved, gentle and docile" (Leith 2014, 37). In such a state, *Seitō* a literary magazine created by a group of five women, namely Raichō Hiratsuka, Yasumochi Yoshiko, Mozume Kazuko, Kiuchi Teiko, and Nakano Hatsuko promoted equal right for women through literature and education. Akiko also wrote for this magazine in a way that her poetry invokes feminine recklessness and bravery which defines the New women. As Wu Peichen (2002: 45,46) relates the idea of "New woman" to the emergence of *Seitō* edited by Japanese feminist Hiratsuka Raichō (1886-1971). Wu explains that when Hiratsuka published *Seitō*, Japan was moving towards national modernism which gave attention to women's education. The women's emancipation movement by the *Seitō* group challenged the limitation in gender roles set by patriarchy of that time. The group further gave attention to the issues of love and sexuality of economically liberated working-class women. Therefore, the *Seitō* group questioned the old custom



of patriarchy and the rebellious attitude of working-class women, such as the expression of love gave them a new title called the New woman. One example of such revolution by women and especially Akiko was her Avante poetry in the first journal of *Seitō*, a magazine (September 1911) plays an important role in understanding how Akiko was bold and brave in expressing her views. The day the mountain move has come,

I speak but no one believe me.
For a long time the mountain have been asleep,
but long ago they all danced with fire,
It doesn't matter if you believe this,
My friends, as long as you believe:
All the sleeping women
are now awake and moving.
Yosano Akiko, 1911

This compelling depiction of empowered women symbolizes a broader uprising against the Meiji government's restrictive social norms and conservative views about women, effectively demonstrating their transition from passive subjects to active players in social change. Akiko metaphorically portrays women as once dormant mountains that are now vibrant, 'dancing with fire.' This imagery emphasizes their hidden strength and collective awakening, directly challenging the patriarchal values maintained by the government. Ultimately, this impactful poetry embodies the bravery and boldness associated with the 'New Woman' ideal, while positioning Akiko as a fervent advocate for gender equality and socio-political transformation. The strong spirit reflected in her poetry is most clearly articulated through her pointed critique of militarism, particularly in her renowned poem, *'Thou Shalt Not Die.'*

Personal Bonds Amid National Conflict: Reinterpreting 'Thou Shalt Not Die':

Thou Shalt Not Die [君死にたまふことなかれ; *Kimi shinitamau koto nakare*], one of her most renowned poems, is considered a significant example of literature that advocates for peace in Japan. Written during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, *Thou Shalt Not Die* is often interpreted as a critique of warfare. Alternatively, this poem can be approached from a deeply personal viewpoint, reflecting an older sister's earnest request to her brother to avoid risking his life in battle. In this poetry Akiko speaks to her brother and reminds him of being a son, husband, and inheritor of the family merchant business, not a soldier who is obligated by duty. She encourages him to prioritize his loved ones over the military expectations of young men required during a war. She probes the question of who is ultimately responsible for the burden of war. The poem's powerful emotional effect and its emphasis on love and personal sorrow have secured its enduring relevance. Textbooks in Japanese schools incorporated this poem, guaranteeing that generations of students will be exposed to Akiko's profound verses. While it is commonly viewed as a critique of war, it is equally significant as a moving expression of grief, love, and the invaluable bonds of family. Yosano Akiko's poetry from the Meiji era offers valuable insights into her critical



perspectives on government policies. It notably challenges nationalist militarism and promotes social reform while also exploring deep personal themes like family connections and the emotional toll of war. This dual focus cements her legacy as a bold literary figure whose works resonate politically and personally.

Cross-Cultural Resonances: Translating Akiko's Poetry into Hindi:

A comparative analysis of the original Japanese text and its Hindi translation reveals lexical choices that enrich the poem's layered meanings, reflecting the unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Japan and India. Below are some examples highlighting the differences, along with others, revealing similarities.

One such difference appears in the Japanese word “愛情” (*aijō*), which translates to “affection” or “love.” It represents feelings of attachment usually linked with familial or romantic love. The Hindi version uses the word “लाड” (*laad*),” which expresses the love that parents provide by nurturing and indulging their children. In several Indian languages, including Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi, the word “लाड” (*laad*) conveys a distinctive aspect of parental care that sets it apart from more general expressions of affection. The term highlights the intimacy of family bonds, reflecting the core of Indian cultural traditions. Likewise, the Japanese term “天皇陛下” (*tennōheika*) traditionally symbolizes the singular and unifying authority of the emperor, a central figure in shaping Japan's national identity and sociopolitical environment. In contrast, the Hindi text uses the word “सम्राट” (*samrat*),” which translates to “emperor” or “supreme ruler.” The use of this word reflects India's political history, where rulers in multiple regions coexisted prior to unification, thereby expanding the concept of supreme leadership beyond a single sovereign leader. Moreover, the analogous use of terms for death—“先立たれた” (*sakitatareta*) in Japanese and “चल बसे” (*chal base*) in Hindi—indicates shared emotional and cultural nuances in both languages. Both languages convey a sense of respect and solemn inevitability, deepening the personal and collective grief expressed in *Thou Shalt Not Die*. These word choices link various languages, inviting readers to recognize universal human themes like responsibility, familial bonds, and the tragic outcomes of war.

This Hindi version of *Thou Shalt Not Die* highlights Akiko's unique literary style and her ability to express personal grief alongside shared contemplation during periods of conflict. Akiko's timeless poem reminds us of the importance of family ties and the experience of love and loss that accompanies all humanity.

भाई, तुम मरना नहीं

योसानो अकिको



ओ मेरे छोटे भाई, मैं तुम्हारे लिए रो रही हूँ ।

वादा करो कि तुम मरोगे नहीं ।

तुम हम सबमें सबसे छोटे हो -

इसलिए सब तुमसे लाड करते हैं ।

क्या माता-पिता ने तुम्हें इसलिए पाला कि,

तुम किसी की हत्या करो और खुद भी मर जाओ?

क्या माता-पिता ने तुम्हें २४ वर्ष तक इसलिए बड़ा किया ?

अब तुम एक पुराने ,

प्रतिष्ठित व्यापारी घराने के मालिक हो।

तुम वंश के उत्तराधिकारी हो ,

वादा करो कि तुम मरोगे नहीं ।

भले ही पोर्ट आर्थर का किला नष्ट हो जाए ,

इससे कोई फर्क नहीं पड़ता ।

क्या तुम नहीं जानते?

व्यापारी परिवारों की परंपराओं में युद्ध का कोई स्थान नहीं होता।

वादा करो कि तुम मरोगे नहीं ।

सम्राट स्वयं युद्धभूमि में नहीं उतरते।

उनके दिल में इतनी गहराई है कि ,

क्या वो कभी हमारे सैनिकों को ,

बस एक दूसरे का खून बहाते देखना चाहेंगे ?

क्या वह सोचते हैं कि मरना ही मानवता का गौरव है?

यदि वे दयालु हैं ,



तो क्या वो ऐसा सोच पाएंगे ?

ओ मेरे छोटे भाई, युद्ध में ,
वादा करो कि तुम मरोगे नहीं ।
पिछली शरद ऋतु, जब हमारे पिता माँ को छोड़कर चल बसे ,
उस माँ की तकलीफों के बीच ,
बिना अपने बेटे के, वो हमारे घर की रखवाली कर रही है ।
और हर दिन उनका एक और सफेद बाल बढ़ रहा है ।

तुम्हारी नाजुक युवा पत्नी ,
पर्दे के पीछे रह कर रोती है ।
क्या तुम उसे भूल गए ? उसके बारे में सोचते भी हो ?
दस महीने साथ बिता कर तुम उसे अकेला छोड़ गए ,
ज़रा उस युवा लड़की के बारे में विचार करो ,
तुम ही बताओ तुम्हारे इलावा इस दुनिया में ,
मुझे और किससे अनुरोध करना चाहिए ?
ओ मेरे छोटे भाई, वादा करो कि तुम मरोगे नहीं ।

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