

Women's Solidarity and Its Limitations in Kirino Natsuo's *Out*: Focusing on Patriarchal Capitalism and the Double Burden on Women

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Abstract This paper focuses on the power dynamics behind women's solidarity, which has been overlooked in previous studies, to examine how violence surrounding women's agency is expressed and what limits exist in their mutual support. The novel *OUT* by Kirino Natsuo shows that the oppression of women, which intensified under the patriarchal system of the post-war Japanese society, continues into the modern era with its newly developed form of patriarchal marriage, acting as a double oppression against women. In particular, this dystopian novel, which reflects the bubble burst that Japanese society has experienced since the early 1990s, features women characters, specifically who are facing a double burden of being a housewife, and reveals that there is a hierarchy and power relations even among those who support each other in pursuit of their shared purpose. Based on the examination of the text, this paper finds that the solidarity that women dream of in the novel *Out* ends up creating another form of patriarchy within itself. In the end, Masako, the only woman who achieves a hopeful ending, can be interpreted as the embodiment of Maria Mies's statement that under the patriarchal system, "equality" for women only means that women become patriarchal men.

Keywords Patriarchal Capitalism; Kirino Natsuo; *Out*; Women's Solidarity; Identity

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Introduction

In Japan, there has been an increase in female workers as the country experienced a period of rapid growth. The use of the term “full-time housewife” for homemakers who do not have jobs has been questioned. In the 1960s, the Japanese society witnessed the emergence of women who could not work full-time due to their families or a chronic labor shortage, leading to an “innovative invention of a form of employment referred to as part-time” according to Ueno Chizuko. In the 1970s, government statistics officially included the category of “short-time employment workers” and raised awareness of their status and form of employment (Ueno 215).¹

Part-time female workers mostly utilized their income for family expenses rather than manage them independently. They also ensured that there was no conflict between their roles as a professional and a homemaker, imposed by patriarchal ideals. Then, in the 1990s, the social fallout of the collapse of the bubble economy affected the dynamics and functions of members of the family, and part-time female workers had a dual role as homemakers and breadwinners. Kirino Natsuo’s novel, *Out*, revolves around these women and reflects the social changes that have emerged since the mid-90s. The novel begins with description of the simple repetitive labor of housewives in a bento factory. Further into the story, after one of the main characters, Yayoi murders her husband, it illustrates how the others help cover it up without any ethical conflicts. The narrative of the women disposing the dead body is portrayed as a business procedure.

The extant studies on *Out* are largely divided into three main types: first, a genre-evaluation of the novel from the detective and mystery lens. This perspective involves a study investigating the novel as a crime/detective novel according to Kirino Natsuo’s past tendencies or how this novel reflects female labor and the image of an unstable society. Specifically, it is notable that the worsening economic situation after the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy and the image of the lives of ordinary people were focused on the main motives of murder and the handling of the corpse and solidarity between women (Ota, 2006; Nakagawa, 2006). The second perspective is a feminist observation of the novel. This includes a study focused

1 “Short-Term Employees” accounted for 6.7% of all employees at the end of the high-growth period. When it came to female employees alone, 12.2% of the respondents were employed. Then the number continued to grow through the 1970s, reaching 22.0% of female employees in 1985. In short, one out of five female workers worked part-time. They were usually female workers with spouses. Therefore, part-time housewives were structurally incorporated into the Japanese labor market as an indispensable part of the Japanese labor market.”

on the characters who are all ordinary women and housewives (Kobayashi, 2008) as well as the issue of lack of visualization of non-material labor within the home along with part-time labor (Taneda, 2009). Furthermore, there have been studies that focus on the characters of *Out* and discuss the economic gaps or disparities in the contents of labor or on social disconnection based on debt-dynamics (Inoue, 2018). There are also studies that observe other novels written by Kirino Natsuo along similar lines and discuss society and the self-reliance of the characters (mainly non-regular workers) in each novel (Shirai, 2020).

Past studies have attempted to investigate the solidarity and self-reliance of women centered on the characters of *Out*, but they mainly focused on the Japanese society and women's labor conditions during the economic crisis, the dynamics between these factors, and the cover-up of the crime. However, a close observation of the novel shows that there are new power dynamics among women under the surface of unity and cooperation. An interpretation through solidarity is insufficient to explain the initial relations among the four women and the conflicts that arise during the handling of the crime. Therefore, this study also focuses on the power dynamics that emerge from in the situation. It aims to investigate the types of limitations that inhibited the manifestation of violence centered around self-reliance and cooperation of the women, which has not been previously discussed.

Double Burden of Women in the Patriarchy

The main characters in the novel *Out* are four women, namely, Katori Masako, Jonouchi Kuniko, Azuma Yoshie, and Yamamoto Yayoi. All work at a bento factory during the nightshift (as it pays higher than dayshift) necessitated by their family background. Their job entails lining up the rails, placing the trays, scooping the rice into them, and spreading it evenly by following the processing procedure of bento boxes. It is comprised of simple tasks such as adding side dishes or sauces. Masako works at the factory because she was unable to find any other suitable job after being laid off from the company, she had worked for nearly 20 years. Although her family seems normal, they all live separate lives, with no emotional exchanges between them. Yoshie is the breadwinner of the family and has been balancing her job and her duties as a homemaker since her husband died five years ago due to cirrhosis. She is tired of her life and wonders about how long she can sustain it. Yayoi, who commits murder (the most important act in the development of the novel), and her husband were a dual-income family. However, when she realized that her husband lost nearly five million yen in savings to gambling, she interrogates him, and he uses violence against her. Next day, she impulsively commits murder.

Kuniko is portrayed as someone who not only uses her income but also uses debts to make unplanned payments. Tetsuya, who lives with her, runs away with all her luggage and money, and Kuniko ends up taking on credit card debt and private loans.

Character	Situation at home	Role at the factory and relationship with other characters
Katori Masako (43)	Lives with husband, with whom she shares no emotional connection and a son with hikikomori. Although they are a family, they live separate lives.	She is smart and quick to address the situation, immediately grasps what happened to the women around her, and plays a central role.
Azuma Yoshie (mid-50s)	Nurses her bedridden mother-in-law and looks after her teenage (high-school) daughter.	She is referred to as “teacher” by her co-workers who are amateurish at work because of her quick hands. Yoshie, who is in need, often borrows money from Masako.
Yamamoto Yayoi (34)	Dual-income family with her husband and two children (ages 5 and 3)	Masako finds out that Yayoi was domestically abused by her husband. After she commits murder, she relies on Masako to dispose of the body.
Jonouchi Kuniko (33)	Lives with Tetsuya and pays back her private loans.	Kuniko thinks of petty tricks with Yoshie, who is quick-handed, and Masako, who is sensitive, to make the work easier.

The table summarizes the roles and situations at home of the characters and the interrelationships of women in the factory. The relationship between them is cooperative which expands to private solidarity after Yayoi’s murder of her husband. The cover-up of the case seems to be successful as the characters work in cahoots following Masako’s orders. However, Satake, who was falsely accused of killing Yamamoto Kenji, Yayoi’s husband, chases after them and threatens to kill Masako, causing a crisis. The novel concludes with Masako killing Satake and searching for a place to escape.

The core of all the conflicts that unfold in *Out* is the economic recession that the Japanese society faces after the bubble economy collapses. Housewives, who have played a supportive role and have not previously been breadwinners, now face the pressure of the double burden of serving duties as a homemaker and the breadwinner. Specifically, it can be said that their state of exploitation due to the financial burden but also within the home is crucial to the novel. Kobayashi Mieko highly appreciates Kirino Natsuo’s achievements in her portrayal of the circumstances of the housewives. However, while she discusses their escape from

the situation, she states that “it is perceived as a financial problem, but in reality, it is a crack in human relations”(Kobayashi 60), focusing not only on financial dynamics but on the dynamics between the women's labor and family.

Although these female characters are the breadwinners, they are unable to play a leading role in their households and are exploited by their families. Family members take their labor and sacrifices for granted, which creates discrimination at home. The following quote shows author Kirino Natsuo diagnosing the situation of female workers and housewives painted in his novel.

“They're working in those places, blue-collar jobs. So, there are classes within the family. In this sense, everyone works hard, but are grim-faced. It's supplementary work. They work to support the family, with no promotions, nothing whatsoever.” (Kirino 19)

In families, the classification between a husband who works at an office and a wife who does simple work in a factory leads to improper treatment of women, and the latter's labor is not given the proper compensation and is undermined, leading to loss of their self-reliance. This double burden is also illustrated in Masako's family, although Masako's burdens are relatively lighter than that of Yoshie, who bears the responsibility of nursing her mother-in-law and supporting her family. The following quote is from the novel, written from Masako's point of view.

The two of them kept their own schedules, never consulting her, but on this one point they were amazingly regular, as if it were an article of faith: they always made it home for dinner. This almost childlike faith in her cooking struck her as odd. Left to her own devices, she would have eaten anything or nothing, but knowing how they depended on this meal, she found herself worrying over their special likes and dislikes, preparing something that would appeal to both of them. But in return they seemed completely unresponsive. Whatever ties had once bound them were all but gone, and only her prescribed role remained to hold her down. (*OUT* 251)

As you can see in the scene above, Masako's husband reaps the benefits while she is weighed down by duties and responsibilities of her family, which is on the verge of collapse as family members were leading separate lives. As Ueno Chizuko states, the husband (the head of the family) “depends on the wife's housework, and at work, he is a boss who uses part-time female workers like his wife for low

wages. The husband is also reaping the fruits of his wife's supplementary household income" (Ueno 221). Among the four female characters, Kuniko, who lives with Tetsuya, is not like the other housewives. She does not sacrifice herself and often uses violence against Tetsuya. However, even Kuniko, who is somewhat selfish but faithful to her needs, is also exploited as she is deprived of everything by Tetsuya and is left alone in debt.

Meanwhile, Yayoi impulsively kills her husband. Economic motive has been highlighted in previous studies, but it can also be seen an act of removing her husband who no longer plays a role in the family after realizing that she is unlikely to receive any compensation for working nightshifts and fulfilling her role as a homemaker. Along with Yayoi, Masako and Yoshie were also eager to disband their families as a means to escape the burden and duties as women and housewives under patriarchal capitalism. This combined with the desire to regain self-reliance, is manifested through violence. Violence that has been inflicted on these women was reproduced by them. Therefore, these acts are not associated with ethical issues, but rather are supported by the readers. Ota Tetsuo stated in her paper "About Kirino Natsuo's *Out*" that "Yayoi is a woman who committed murder. However, many readers sympathize with Yayoi, but not with her husband, Kenji" (Ota, 58), pointing out that readers sympathize with the criminal and her accomplices and wish for the dissolution or collapse of the family.

Female workers in factories are treated as parts that can be replaced any time and must perform their repetitive assigned role of filling bento boxes with no self-reliance. Moreover, they are not protected from their husbands or family members within the patriarchal system but rather are exploited through the double burden. In this situation, women cannot find a way to escape from the chains of double oppression and regain their self-reliance. The violence that has been inflicted on them has become another form of violence.

Women's Violence as a Desire to Disband Their Families

In the novel, women's violence is manifested in two ways. First, crime, including murder, committed by women to end the patriarchy. Second, the new power dynamics formed between the women.

Regarding the murder and cover-up in *Out*, the scenes are described in detail through detective Imai such as, "One was that the crimes tended to be unpremeditated, almost haphazard in origin, and the other was that they tended to bring out a feminine solidarity" (*OUT*, 207), "It also seemed that women who had some shared experience tended to become accomplices in this sort of thing out of

sympathy for the murderer” (*OUT* 208). “Then maybe the whole thing was about money. (omitted) It was possible that Yamamoto had promised to pay for her help” (*OUT* 209). These aim to unpack the mystery of the murder motives and the disposal of the body. The cause of violence of women, however, is not only the situation woven into with money but also the subtle emotions seen in women's solidarity and the pursuit of patriarchy. Previous studies investigated such violence and focused on why Masako helps Yayoi. Ota Tetsuo attributed Masako's motivation to “despair for the present life” and “loneliness from the family” and interpreted the relationships of the characters as the product of emotions of solidarity (Ota 59). Nakagawa Tomohiro pointed out that the reason why women unite and cooperate is based on the situational foreshadowing that they will be driven to poverty and dire domestic consequences, and that murder and the relationships among the female characters was derived from unity and solidarity (Nakagawa 123-124). However, the violence of women is not only revealed in the subsequent process of Yayoi's killing of her husband but also after they have received their material compensation, which is significant regarding the dissolution of the family.

In the case of Yoshie, she becomes involved in a subsequent business after dismembering of the Kenji's body, and earns material compensation. However, after her daughter runs away and she is left alone with her sick mother-in-law, she commits murder using arson without hesitation. She aimed to free herself from oppression from her duties as well as economic purposes through the dissolution of the family. Although Masako was aware of this, she turns a blind eye as she did when Yayoi committed murder. At the end of the novel, Masako leaves her family as they do not add meaning to her life and sets to live on her own. Although she nearly faces death upon her encounter with Satake, she eventually removes the obstacle to her independence and achieves her purpose. These scenes reveal that violence undertaken by women in *Out* was not only aimed at escaping from economic poverty but the double-burden of providing economic support and their roles as housewives and breadwinners.

Taking a look at the aspects of their cooperation, the relationship between women in the process of dismantling and disposing of the dead body marks a turning point. As power dynamics are formed among the women around Masako, another form of violence is seen. First, Masako is handed over the Kenji's body from Yayoi. Masako then captures Yoshie, who is surprised to hear that Yayoi committed murder and refuses to cooperate. However, Masako forces Yayoi to cooperate under the pretext of the money she lent her. The following excerpt illustrates Masako's coercive attitude.

“I know,” said Masako. “But it’s true, and there’s no way to undo it. I’ve decided to try to help her, and I want to know if you’ll help, too.”

“Are you out of mind?!” Yoshie shrieked, but then, realizing there were people around, lowered her voice. “She should go turn herself in right now.”

(omitted)

“I couldn’t. Not that.”

“Fine,” said Masako, reaching across the table with her hand open.

“Then pay back the money I lent you last night. Now.” (*OUT*, 64-65)

Such violence sometimes comes in the form of conciliation. The context is identified in the following excerpt.

But Masako already knew that she wouldn’t be able to dismember the body by herself, and she was determined now to get some help. She made a proposal.

“Yayoi said she wanted to pay us back. Would you do it if money were involved?” Yoshie looked up, as if jerked by a string. Her sunken eyes had a perplexed look. (*OUT* 77)

Masako’s coercive and controlling attitude towards other people is also evident in her feelings for Yayoi. Although she voluntarily decided to help dispose the body of Yayoi’s husband, she deals with the process or the procedure arbitrarily. As seen from the above excerpt, when Yoshie asks if it would be okay for Yayoi to mutilate the body into pieces, she says “She’s already agreed to everything. If she has regrets later, that’s her problem” (*OUT* 77), and pressures the hesitant Yoshie.

Moreover, such violence is further highlighted when Kuniko’s selfish nature threatens the safety of the group.

“What are you doing in the bathroom?”

“What do you think we’re doing?” Masako said with a thin laugh. The look she gave her made Kuniko’s skin crawl.

“I don’t know...,” she murmured.

“Did you see something?” Masako asked.

“Well, I thought I did—a piece of meat maybe.”

“I’ll show you what it is,” said Masako abruptly. “Come on.”

(omitted)

“And if you want money as badly as you seem to, you can help us.” At the mention of money, Kuniko's mind shifted gears.

(omitted)

“And how much would I get?”

“How much do you want? I'll talk to Yayoi. But it means you'd be in on the whole thing, and you can't tell anyone.”

“I understand.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Kuniko realized with blank amazement that she'd been caught in the trap that Masako had laid to insure her silence. (*OUT*, 86-87)

As such, violence is manifested not only in the act of murder—in the process of cutting and disposing of the body, dismantling the family and restoring identity—but also in the mutual relations between the four characters. In this situation, the only person who is able to act independently is Masako, and the rest follow Masako's instructions and orders out of fear that word about the murder or the disposal of the body may spread. The dynamics among the women are unequal and are not mutually complementary. These new power dynamics go on to solidify and continue to affect subsequent relationships.

Limitations to Solidarity among Women and Power Dynamics.

The violence in the novel *Out* was eventually chosen by women as a way to escape from their respective patriarchal situations, which is linked to the desires of women who lost their self-reliance through their dual roles as employees and housewives. However, paradoxically, the “violence” they chose in pursuit of the liberation from economic pressure or the double burden within their homes allows for the emergence of new relationships based on violence and oppression. Looking back on the fact that their cooperation was formed in a special space of labor, a “factory,” from the beginning, cooperative relationships could not have been maintained for long in private areas outside of the factory. In previous studies, it was pointed out that “the departure from the site will dilute the purpose of maintaining relationships” (Kobayashi 61), and the special sentiments that were first felt during labor in the factory were redefined through a new structure of relationships during dismembering of the body, forming a kind of power dynamics with the manifestation of violence as observed in the previous section.

Regarding the relationships among these women described in the second half of *Out*, Masaru Inoue viewed it from a capitalist perspective as a “debtor” and a “borrower”. She especially explained the relationships of the women, Masako and

Yoshie's inability to refuse Jumonji's request and accepted the disposal of the body as a business, Kuniko's confession about the disposal of the body, and other relevant events were related to such debt-consciousness and power dynamics centered around money, citing Italian philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of "Homo debitor"¹ and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who stated that one is qualified to be part of the society through "the ability and will to fulfill the role of consumers in the late modern society" (Inoue 81-82). As in Inoue's analysis, the power dynamics formed between these women can be attributed to the disparities in the "purchasing power" under capitalism, but it alone cannot explain Masako's motives in helping Yayoi without any compensation or promises after the murder or the burden, pressure, and violence among subordinate relationships of other characters.

Masako was keen on helping Yayoi, who was under the double oppression of patriarchal capitalism, but when the relationship between Masako and Yayoi becomes that of a client-consignee, Masako ends the relationship. This can be interpreted as Masako's desire for liberation from patriarchal capitalism. Moreover, women's dynamics of cooperation appear to crack as time passes, and the relationships among the four characters are not the same when a certain power dynamic is formed, such as when women feel the double burden in their families. These sentiments are evident in Masako's relationship with Yayoi as seen in the excerpt below.

The telephone rang. It was probably Masako, she thought. Now that she had this nice new friend, she suddenly realized how tiresome it was to have to talk with a bossy know-it-all like Masako. She hesitated, unwilling to pick up the phone. (*OUT* 271)

Yayoi, who was standing beside her, turned around as well, a look of cheerful innocence on her face. Masako had been meaning to leave her out of their plans this time, but when she saw that face—without a trace of the horror they had been through visible there—she felt a violent urge to make her tremble the way she had, just now, out there in the night. She clenched her teeth, trying to resist it. (*OUT* 282)

This scene illustrates Yayoi, who was not directly involved in the destruction of

1 In Maurizio Lazzarato's book "La fabrique de l'homme endetté" (2011), "Homo debitor" means that with modern credit cards, we are already "parts" in the financial capitalist system and live in a social system where we have to live with debt for life.

her husband's body, go through a change of emotions about Masako and Masako's sentiments while observing Yayoi.

During a conversation with Jumonji, Masako lets go of her ethical and moral responsibility regarding the disposal of the body and says, "You can think of it as garbage disposal." Then, Masako becomes the primary agent of labor herself. Considering this, Yayoi and Masako are in a client-consignee relationship, Yayoi and Yoshie in an employer-employee relationship centered around Masako, and Masako and Kuniko in a hierarchical relationship, due to a material cost. Depending on the nature of capitalism that emerged during their process of labor, each person's desire conflicts and cracks the relationship, and the function of their fate of community is lost. The logic behind Masako's actions entails her desire to liberate herself from capitalist employer-employee relations, and free herself from the oppression in the home, which is reflective of the ecology of capitalism. Yayoi's change in attitude following the conclusion of the incident can be interpreted as her faithfully following a capitalist system using Masako's labor. Therefore, solidarity, which began in protest against capitalism that have made the women victims of the system, loses its function due to conflicts with each other's desires in the process of handling the case and becomes indicative that they would once again be subordinate to the capitalist system.

Conclusion

This study focused on the power dynamics behind women's solidarity, which has been overlooked in previous studies, and how violence regarding women's self-reliance was manifested and the kinds of parameters that hindered their cooperation. Each character in the novel dreams to escape from their family as a way to regain their self-reliance and chose violence to achieve it. This paradoxically created another dynamic of oppression among women.

Out is a dystopian novel that reflects the rapid economic downturn that the Japanese society faced upon the 1990s and reveals that there are various levels and power dynamics within cooperation among women, especially characters who bear the double-burden as housewives and share the same purpose as protagonists. Such power dynamics is also a reproduction of the oppression and violence women face in the patriarchal capitalist labor system. Masako, the only character who sees a hopeful way out, can be interpreted as an embodiment of Maria Mies' argument that "equality for women in patriarchal systems only means that women become patriarchal men" (Maria Mies 108).

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