



Title	Perfect Mirrors : An Examination of Mother and Daughter Relationships in Modern Japanese Women' s Literature
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Citation	待兼山論叢. 文化動態論篇. 2019, 53, p. 31-50
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/81505
rights	
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Perfect Mirrors: An Examination of Mother and Daughter Relationships in Modern Japanese Women's Literature

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Keywords: Oba Minako／Takahashi Takako／Gender／Mother-Daughter Relationships／
Feminism

1. Introduction

This article will focus on the mother and daughter relationships in two Japanese short stories by women authors. The first, *Congruent Figures* was written by Takahashi Takako. *Congruent Figures* is a story of a mother dealing with her hate towards her daughter, whose resemblance to her mother grows stronger day by day. The second story, *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*, was written by Oba Minako. This story is more fantastical than the former, though it still centers on similar themes. The main character in this story is an unnamed mountain witch with the ability to read minds. Much of the story centers on her relationship with her mother and, in time, her own daughter.

The reason these two stories were chosen is because they were both published in the 1970s, as part of a wave of literature written by women focusing on women's experiences. What drew me to these stories was the sense that these stories depicted the cyclical nature of relationships between mothers and daughters. Even though every generation of daughters tends to think that their own mother is old fashioned, these stories show the link between the past and the present of mothers and daughters.

2. *Congruent Figures*

2.1 The Daughter as a Threat to the Mother's Sexuality

The mother in *Congruent Figures*, Akiko, is brimming with repressed sexual frustration. Though we learn nothing about her sexual relationship with her husband, her desires become apparent in her interactions with a younger man from the village:

He used to bring sweet-fish every year when the ban on fishing sweetfish was removed, saying here is sweetfish, I brought it for you madam. He was four or five years younger than I, but looked even younger. Although he was nonchalant, he was quite sensitive, and a look that surfaced sometimes when he smiled induced a coquettish feeling in me.¹⁾

The special attention this man offers Akiko, makes her feel desired. She therefore makes extra effort to look feminine when he is visiting the house.

She describes the sensual side of herself as another woman, hidden inside her. Furthermore, the symbol of a flower is used to describe her sexuality:

If given a chance it could have bloomed into a large flower spreading wide its pink petals and wafting around a sweet fragrance. Such a flower which could not bloom existed inside of me. It existed inside of me without shrinking or withering, no, containing a still richer fragrance precisely because it could not bloom fully.²⁾

In this passage, it becomes clear that Akiko's sexuality has not disappeared, it is simply hidden. Why? Because once a woman turns into a mother, her sexuality is disregarded and seen as inappropriate in society. Mothers are supposed to be paragons of virtue, not sexual beings. The taboo of women's sexuality — and a

mother's sexuality especially — still persists to this day. Freud's theory of the whore and Madonna complex states that men can only see woman as either whore or Madonna — he cannot love and have sex with the same woman. This becomes a problem in marriages with children, because once the wife becomes a mother, the husband cannot see her as a sexual being anymore. This may be the case in Akiko's marriage, but there is too little description of her relationship with her husband to go beyond speculation. In any case, she has turned her sexual attention towards a younger man, who eventually turns his attention towards her daughter Hatsuko.

When Hatsuko is in her teens, she starts imitating her mother's behavior towards the man. This makes the mother angry, as she feels as if her daughter has stolen the woman inside her. This frustration becomes even clearer in a daydream — or actual dream — of Akiko's. When Hatsuko hits puberty and the man's attention turns towards her, he invites her on a date to go fishing in the mountains. Akiko lays down to rest on the sofa when they leave for their date, and she has a vision of the date:

Getting off at the mountain and walking down the slope, they come to the riverbank. The pebbles at the riverbank could be felt through the soles of the sneakers. On the near side of the river, layers of shining clear water meander along, but at the far bank a cliff juts up and the blue-black water at its foot is stagnant. Hatsuko gazes at the disparity between this darkness and light. The man walks further upstream. This side of the river too becomes narrower and the slope rocky. They move carefully, feeling for the indented surface of the rock. The man stretches his hand out to her. I am all right uncle. Hatsuko withdraws her hands. At that moment, she slips on the wet, sloping rock. The man quickly grabs her arm. But the lower part of Hatsuko's body has already fallen into the water. I remain still, for I feel it pleasant to have my body in the water. I look up at his eyes while he holds my arm. The warmth of his body comes creeping through my arm. What happened? Hatsuko shakes her head.

There is no way to answer. I do not want to move. The warmth of the man's body transmitted through my arm faintly lights the candle of my body. The river flows from the lower part of my body.³⁾

What is important to note in this scene is the shift in perspective. The pronoun "she" switches to "I", as if it's Akiko who is on the date, not her daughter. This shift shows Akiko's wish to express herself sexually, and the river is a metaphor for her sexual desire. What is also interesting to note is that the "I" in the fantasy is a recurring version of Akiko. This "I" is also apparent when Akiko gathers herself after the daydream.

Regaining myself, I stood up in the living room. It was not me who went with the man. It was Hatsuko who went with him. (...) Hatsuko and the man were already far away and I had no way of taking back my self which was taken by Hatsuko.⁴⁾

In this scene, there are two "I"s. Firstly, there is the physical version of Akiko, the one standing in the living room. The other "I" is the one who slipped in the river. In other words, Akiko's identity has been fragmented because of her daughter. She is threatened by her daughter's budding sexuality and sees it as her own. It could be argued that the psychological blurring of the lines between mother and daughter is the source of many issues in mother-daughter-relationships.

2.2 Uncanny Bodies

The clearest source of animosity between mother and daughter in *Congruent Figures* is the body and its sensory manifestations. Akiko's discomfort with her daughter grows steadily as the body of the younger grows into a body that physically resembles her own. There are several instances where the mother is taken aback —

you might even say frightened — by her daughter's resemblance. Not only does she look like her, her voice and smell are also the same as Akiko's.

One day, Akiko notices a new body odor in the house. Or rather, she notices her own body odor in new places, and realizes it must belong to her daughter.

Previously, the smell of others which I encountered in this house were the body smell of my husband mixed with the smells of cigarettes and pomade, and the body smell of Masao, a sticky, sharp stimulating smell particular to boys in puberty. My own body smell stayed with me always and went wherever I went. Yet with Hatsuko's growth, I was forced to smell my body smell even in places where I had not gone. I was forced to have the strange feeling of encountering my body smell outside of myself.⁵⁾

The feeling which Akiko is describing can perhaps best be referred to as uncanny — or *unheimlich*. Uncanny is the encounter of something familiar in an unsettling context, in this case, outside of herself. Furthermore, the mother tries to distinguish her and her daughter's hair by burning it.

I picked up a strand of hair which had fallen on the cushion. Then I plucked one strand of my own. Raising the two between before my eyes, I looked at them against the light. The black hairs had a bluish tint, and only the shine of the blue appeared when they were looked at against the light. The two were indistinguishable. Taking a box of matches from the kitchen, I went out to the open corridor. Holding the two strands slightly separated between my thumb and index finger, I set fire to them from the bottom. (...) The two hairs shrank up from the bottom, forming the same shape (...) They soon disappeared from the bottom, leaving only two coarse, black balls almost touching my fingers.⁶⁾

Here again, the mother and the daughter create the “same shape”. The burning of the strands of hair suggests a kind of ritual for exorcising demons. However, Akiko is not able to distinguish the two hairs, and so the “demon” — her daughter — has not been exorcised.

The most unsettling episode is perhaps, yet again, a scene blurring the lines between dreams and reality. One day when the mother is lying sick with a fever, she hears two voices having a conversation, one of them seemingly her own.

“Ohh, that’s all right.”

A bouncing voice could be heard. The impression that it came from outside immediately faded into an impression that it came from inside of me, and I wondered vacantly about the overlapping of the two.⁷⁾

In her feverish state, Akiko believes the voice to be her own. However, it is later revealed to be the voice of her daughter speaking with a woman at the door. When Akiko wakes up and realizes her mistake, she is deeply unsettled: “How eerie, I thought in bed, that while I am lying here like this another me is walking around me and talking to the peasant woman.”⁸⁾ Once again she refers to her daughter as “me”, blurring the lines of the two.

Soon afterwards, she looks through the window to see her two children playing together on the lawn. She takes out a pencil and points it towards her daughter like a gun. While pointing the “gun”, she inwardly pleads to her daughter to move away from her line of fire. This scene shows the complexity of Akiko’s internal struggle. She doesn’t just hate her daughter; she is also afraid of her own hatefulness. She wishes to simultaneously eliminate her daughter and protect her from herself.

2.3 The Reproduction of Femininity

It is not only the Hatsuko’s body, voice and smell that resembles her mother’s;

her actions also mirror hers. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the daughter mimics her mother's behavior.

The first incident to awaken Akiko's anger towards her daughter occurs when the latter is nine years old. During a family dinner, it is clear to Akiko that her husband is not feeling like himself. Just as she is about to offer him his favorite dish to cheer him up, her daughter does it instead.

"Father, isn't this what you want?" Hatsuko's hand picked up the small bowl of *umeboshi*, leaving my hand dangling helplessly in midair. I saw that her hand was exactly like mine in shape and color. If her hand were enlarged, it would have become the same hand as mine.

"You don't look well today, Father," Hatsuko said. It was just what I had intended to say. (...)

I should have rejoiced in the sensitivity that a daughter of only nine had just displayed. But instead, some unexplainable feeling of minding it stayed in my mind.⁹⁾

In this scene, there is a gap between what the mother thinks she should feel and what she actually feels. This is a recurring issue between the two; Akiko's inability to feel love for her daughter and the resulting self-hate that comes with not being able to feel the way she thinks a mother is "supposed" to feel.

Their "sensitivity" could also be called emotional labor. Emotional labor is the process of anticipating other people's (emotional) needs and taking care of their well-being. This labor is often not expressed in words and can therefore be hard to pick up on. In the episode at the dinner table, both mother and daughter notice the father's unusual behavior, and try to make him feel better. Emotional labor is often seen as the responsibility of mothers, wives and women in general. That is why Akiko "should" be proud of her daughter's sensitivity — it shows that she is growing

into a woman, the kind who nurtures the people around her, just like her mother. In a way, emotional labor is a big part of what we call femininity and motherhood. This is passed down from mother to daughter, daughter to granddaughter, through nurture. When a small girl is given a baby doll to play with, it is supposed to teach her how to nurture. In this way it is engrained in many women that mothering and emotional labor is inherently natural to them, though it is nothing more than a social construct passed on from generation to generation of women.

3. *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*

3.1 Witchcraft and Otherness

The unnamed protagonist in *The Smile of a Mountain Witch* is a mountain witch (*yamauba*) with the ability of reading minds. As a small child she uses this power to read her mother's mind and recite her thoughts out loud. This puts her mother in a difficult position, because her daughter can read every negative thought she has towards her, as seen in the passage below.

The mother, utterly amazed at her daughter reading her mind time after time, would give in, saying, "This child is very bright, but she really tires me out!"

When she was a little older and her mother bought her a new toy, she would say, "This would keep her quiet for a while." Her mother, no doubt a little irritated, looked at her daughter, who would then say, "Why in the world does this child read other people's minds all the time. She's like a mountain witch. I wonder if people will come to dislike her like a mountain witch.

These are, of course, the kinds of things that her mother thought of often, and the child was merely verbalizing her mother's thoughts.¹⁰⁾

In this scene, the mother thinks that her daughter is like a mountain witch. She

also thinks that mountain witches are naturally disliked by humans. This idea is no doubt impactful on her daughter's self-regard; she learns from a young age that being a mountain witch is negative. It is therefore not surprising when she starts to alter her behavior so as not to reveal herself as a mountain witch. When she begins school, her mother notices the change and confronts her about it.

"How come you are so quiet now that you go to school?"

Her daughter replied, "When I say whatever is on my mind, people give me unpleasant looks, so I decided not to speak out anymore. Grown-ups are happy when children act stupidly-as though they don't know anything. So from now on I've decided to keep grown-ups happy."

The mother responded firmly in a manner befitting one who had borne a mountain witch. "You say whatever is on your mind. You don't have to pretend. You're a child, remember?"

But the child merely regarded her mother with a disdainful smile.¹¹⁾

Here the mother's hypocrisy is clear: Though she finds her daughter's mind reading frustrating, she tells her daughter to say whatever she wants. The daughter therefore starts acting the way she knows her mother wants her to, not how she tells her to. All the while, her mother is aware of her daughter's acting.

In *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*, the daughter's magical ability leads to conflict not only between mother and daughter, but also in the village. The daughter's witchcraft alienates her from the other humans, because she has to hide her abilities from them. Furthermore, there is strong reason to believe that not only the daughter, but also the mother is a mountain witch. This means that the mother's ambivalence towards her daughter's skills could also be a reflection on her own self-image. This raises the question: If living in the village forces them to hide their powers, why does the mother not take her daughter with her and leave?

This could be explained by Clarissa Pinkola Estés' psychoanalytical theory about the H. C. Andersen fairy tale *The Ugly Duckling*. She characterizes the mother duck as an "ambivalent mother" of a child that doesn't fit in. The mother is divided in her wish to fit into the community on one hand, and to love to her child on the other. This divide takes a heavy toll on the mother's psyche, which ends with her choosing the village over helping her child.¹²⁾ However, the mountain witch herself doesn't leave the village in her lifetime, neither does her daughter as far as we know.

3.2 Marriage as Liberation and Oppression

As the mountain witch grows from girl to woman, she feels more and more oppressed by her relationship with her mother. Or rather, she feels that she herself is a weight on her mother and wants to free them both from the relationship.

The mother, too, began to feel fatigued when she was with her daughter. When she was not around her, she felt relieved. She began to long for the day when her daughter would find an adequate young man and leave her. In other words, the mother and daughter came to the natural phase of life when they would part from each other.

The daughter, too, knew that she was a burden to her mother - in fact, she had sensed that she was a burden to her as far back as she could remember - and she wanted to free her mother, as well as herself.¹³⁾

For the mountain witch, the only way to escape the suffocating relationship with her mother is through marriage. She does eventually meet a young man, and they fall in love. Since the mountain witch can read his mind, she is constantly aware of what she could do to make him happy. Even though he makes unreasonable demands, she complies. The narrator utilizes a thick layer of sarcasm to describe the unequal relationship between the mountain witch and her husband. They are also referred to

as “the woman” and “the man”, adding another layer of meaning, as if to say that this could be said about heterosexual relationships in general.

Since the woman was gratified by the man, she came to think that she would not mind making all kinds of efforts to keep him happy. But this turned out to be very hard labor, for after all, every corner of his mind was transparent to her. If only one could not see another's heart, one would not become weary and would be able to live happily.¹⁴⁾

In this paragraph, it becomes apparent how the mountain witch's mind reading ability could also be read as a metaphor for women's emotional labor in heterosexual marriage. This aspect of *The Smile of the Mountain Witch* is reminiscent of the mother and daughter's emotional labor for the father in *Congruent Figures*. Because of the toll it takes on the mountain witch to read her husband's mind, cater to him and hide her ability, she is unhappy in her marriage. She starts dreaming about running away to the mountains, where she could live freely as a mountain witch:

Far off in the midst of the mountains there would be nobody to trouble her, and she would be free to think as she pleased. (...)

When she imagined herself living alone in the mountains, she likened herself to a beautiful fairy, sprawled in the fields, naked under the benevolent sun, surrounded by trees and grasses and animals. But once a familiar human being appeared from the settlement, her face would change into that of an ogress.¹⁵⁾

As we see in this daydream, the mountains symbolize freedom to the mountain witch. However, her daydream is always disturbed by the thought of her husband, or villagers in general, interrupting her solitary life. Once seen by a human, she is

transformed into a monstrosity. This is because she has internalized her mother's — and the villagers' — view of mountain witches as bad and unlikable. Perhaps for this reason, she never tries to escape her life in the village, and she lives there until her death.

As she and her husband grow older, they start worrying about his health. Her husband believes that he is ill, and he coerces her to take care of him, even though he is not actually sick. In this way, she is forced into the traditional female role of caretaking. Through her marriage, the mountain witch is “domesticated” to the extent that she becomes the perfect example of so-called female virtue and selflessness. The daydream of the mountain represents one extreme of “womanhood”, her role as housewife the other. And in the end, it's impossible to say that one of these is the “real” mountain witch. This becomes apparent towards the end of the story, with the death of the mountain witch.

3.3 The Mother's Death

Towards the end of *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*, the protagonist becomes ill with cerebral thrombosis. After going into a coma, she is hospitalized, and her husband and children worriedly watch over her. When the doctor, however, tells them that she might hang on for longer than expected, her adult daughter starts to feel anxious to leave to take care of her own family. The mountain witch, reading her daughter's mind, decides to let go and die so as not to be a burden to her family.

In the last smile she exchanged with her daughter, she clearly read her daughter's mind. Her daughter's eyes said to her that she did not want to be tied down by her any longer. “Mother, I don't need you to protect me any more. You've outlived your usefulness. If you have to be dependent on me, if you can't take care of yourself without being a burden to others, please, mother, please disappear quietly. Please don't torment me any longer. I, too, am preparing

myself so that I won't trouble my daughter as I am being troubled by you. I'm willing to go easily. That's right. I ought to go easily. I never want to be the kind of parent who, just because she doesn't have the courage to come to terms with that resolution, continues to press her unwanted kindness upon her offspring." It seemed that her daughter, the product of her and her husband, possessed a strength of will that was twofold. Either she would overcome all temptation, exercise moderation, and live sturdily until the moment of her death at a hundred, or live haughtily and selfishly to the end, retaining the energy to kill herself at eighty. In either case, the woman was satisfied with the daughter she had borne and raised.¹⁶⁾

In this paragraph, we can see that her daughter has become the same kind of self-sacrificing woman as herself. She states that she never wants to become a burden to her daughters. Why daughters? Because it is traditionally the daughter's (or daughter-in-law's) responsibility to take care of her aging parents. The mountain witch's daughter, however, wants to end that cycle. The mother sees two possible outcomes for her daughter: living a careful and long life without relying on her daughter for help, or living her life to the fullest and killing herself before she would need care-taking. This thought pleases the mother, perhaps because she sees a different outcome for her daughter. However, it should be noted that her daughter's main objective for leaving her mother's bedside is to take care of her family, exactly as her mother spent her own life doing. It is therefore difficult to decipher the mother's smile to her daughter. The following paragraph, revealing the mountain witch's last thoughts, might provide a clue.

She wondered which would be the happier, to live in the mountains and become a man-eating witch, or to have the heart of a mountain witch and live in the settlement. But now she knew that either way it would not have made much

difference. If she had lived in the mountains, she would have been called a mountain witch. Living in the settlement she could have been thought of as a fox incarnate or an ordinary woman with a sturdy mind and body who lived out her natural life. That was the only difference, and either way it would have been all the same.¹⁷⁾

In the end, the mountain witch does not believe that life in the mountains would have made her happier than the life she led in the village. The reason for this is that either choice involves being denied one side of herself. In the mountains, she would have been vilified and seen simply an evil ogress. On the other hand, staying in the village involved living a completely domesticated life. She also had to hide her mind-reading powers, because the humans didn't appreciate them. Only in death could she be a free mountain witch, without the judgment of humans.

In the moment of her death, she feels "the heartbeat of a mountain witch reviving", and she smiles. This is the meaning behind the smile of the mountain witch; it's the smile of someone who has denied one side of herself for a lifetime, finally able to reunite the different sides of herself in death.

It's not only in *The Smile of a Mountain Witch* that smiles play a significant part. In *Congruent Figures*, there is a mysterious old woman that Akiko sometimes meets in the street. Every time Akiko encounters her, the woman gives strange advice and behaves in a manner that frightens her. Akiko knows the woman by reputation, and describes her in the following manner.

She was living separately from her family in a dilapidated house at the foot of the mountain. She was called a crazy old woman, for she frequently upset people by saying strange things. (...) The old woman smiled. While her eyes did not smile at all, there was something which emerged from the spaces among the wrinkles which creased her entire face that I took for a smile.¹⁸⁾

The old woman lives by the mountains, and is old and “crazy”. In this way she shares several traits with the mountain witch. The old woman often talks to Akiko about her and her daughter.

Coming out from between the woods and a white wall, the old woman appeared unexpectedly and approached me with her unsmiling smile.

“What happened to your daughter today?” she said, striking the ground sharply with the tip of her cane.

“I am not always with her.”

“Yes, yes. That’s best. It will be better for you to walk alone.”

She was annoying me and I tried to pass her, but she continued to pursue me.

“It’s better that two similar ones do not stay together. It’s inviting trouble.”¹⁹⁾

The old woman’s smile could be interpreted as a smile of solidarity between mothers. She seems to understand the difficulty of the mother and daughter’s relationship without being told, which could mean that she has been through a similar experience. In other words, the old woman’s smile is a smile of knowing.

4. The Cyclical Nature of Mothers and Daughters in *Congruent Figures* and *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*

In both stories, there is a strong link between the past and future generations. There are not only the mother and daughter, in both cases there is also a granddaughter, too young to play a big part in the stories. As the mothers age and become grandmothers, no longer as relevant to their daughters as they were in their childhood, they observe their daughters with their own daughters. In the case of *Congruent Figures*, the mother is reluctant to engage with her infant granddaughter. In the very last scene of the story, her daughter pushes her to hold her granddaughter

for the first time.

I was forced to take that heavy, damp, warm thing in my arms. Because I happened to bear Hatsuko, my blood ran in her, and since Hatsuko bore Misako, my blood continued to run even in Misako. (...) In this way, from next to next, I will continue to expand limitlessly into the dark space of the future. The thought gave me an ominous feeling. (...) I returned the child to Hatsuko's arms.

"She looks like me, doesn't she?" Hatsuko said. But there were no distinct features yet on the infant's fat face. I imagined future days when gradually from a certain time all of a sudden this face would come to resemble that of Hatsuko.

"You too bore a girl," I said, smiling thinly. I checked my impulse to say that it will begin with you now.²⁰⁾

Akiko's view of the relationship between mothers and daughters is extremely pessimistic. She is certain that her daughter will face the same issues with her daughter as the two of them. This is because she believes a part of herself has been stolen by her daughter, and her granddaughter will steal a part of her daughter, as well as herself. There is something Buddhist about her view; the never-ending cycle of mothers and daughters reflecting each other like infinity mirrors.

There are also hints pointing towards a lineage of mountain witches in *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*. In her last moments, the protagonist has a realization about her own mother: "Just before she took her last breath, it crossed her mind that her own mother must have been a genuine mountain witch as well."²¹⁾ This points towards her own daughter also being a mountain witch, though the narrator doesn't provide enough information about her to be sure. However, it's also important to note the previously mentioned difference between the mountain witch and her daughter. Whereas the mountain witch was always torn between her life in the village and the dream of the life in the mountains, the daughter might be able to find

balance in her life. Judging by her daughter's thoughts about aging, she might live a more "selfish" life than her mother.

If the mothers and daughters of *Congruent Figures* and *The Smile of a Mountain Witch* are like mirrors, what do they reflect? In *Congruent Figures*, the mother has a nightmare about the old woman. In the dream, she follows the old woman to her house in the mountains, where the old woman is waiting for her. She takes a mirror out of a box, and hands it to Akiko, urging her to look into it. In the mirror, she sees a face overlapping her own face.

I looked into the mirror. My face was reflected in vague outline on the dull surface. While I stared at it the face began gradually to change. Or I should say that from behind the blue-brown surface of the mirror a strange, unfamiliar face emerged vaguely, and it overlapped my face. The face which revealed itself contained anger.

"It is the face of mother" At these words of the old woman, the image on the mirror's surface disappeared.

"It was not my mother's," I said. Then the copper mirror in my hand disappeared too, and looking up I saw that the old woman's eyes were gazing at me with the same color as the mirror's surface.

"It is the face of mother itself in general."²²⁾

This is the face that her daughter inherits from her mother. At the end of the story when she is holding her granddaughter, what she foresees is her daughter with this face, "the face of mother". In a similar dream sequence in *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*, the mother looks at her own reflection in the water:

Then she would see that half her face was smiling like an affectionate mother, while the other half was seething with demonic rage. Blood would trickle down

from half her mouth while it devoured and ripped the man's flesh apart. The other half of her lips was caressing the man who curled up his body in the shadow of one of her breasts, sucking it like a baby.²³⁾

This reflection illustrates the extremes of the two lives the mountain witch had to choose between: Living in the village, she was seen by the humans as the affectionate mother, whereas if she had lived in the forest she would be seen as the man-eating demon. Both are a part of her, as the different reflections in Akiko's mirror both reflect the same woman. And in the same way, their daughters will inevitably reflect their mothers to a certain degree, whether they like it or not.

5. Conclusion

This article has investigated the relationships between mothers and daughters in two short stories from the 1970s. The mothers in *Congruent Figures* and *The Smile of a Mountain Witch* struggle with expressing their anger, frustration and desires inside — and outside — of their conventional heterosexual marriages.

In *Congruent Figures*, Akiko's bleak outlook on womanhood leads to intense self-hatred, as well as hate towards her daughter whose resemblance is uncanny. This story doesn't offer a bright future for Akiko's daughter, but rather an endless cycle of pain for all women to come. The only glimmer of hope is the reconciliation between the estranged mother and daughter. With the birth of a granddaughter, the mother and daughter can finally share the specific pain of mothering daughters.

The Smile of a Mountain Witch on the other hand, offers a slightly more positive outlook on the future. Reading her daughter's mind, the mother realizes that her daughter might make different choices than her. Though the story ends on a highly ironic note — with the father and daughter misinterpreting the mother's feelings about her own life — the women in Oba's story have more agency than that of Takahashi's. They are, after all, witches.

In both stories, the daughters take on similar nurturing roles as their mothers as they grow up. The mothers do not tell them to do things differently, to seek lives with more freedom than their own. With knowing smiles, they only observe their daughters as they go down similar paths as their own, their futures yet to be written.

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SUMMARY

Perfect Mirrors:
An Examination of Mother and Daughter
Relationships in Modern Japanese Women's Literature

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Keywords: Oba Minako, Takahashi Takako, Gender, feminism, women's writing,
Mother-Daughter Relationships

This article will focus on two stories involving mother and daughter relationships in Japanese literature. The first story, *Congruent Figures*, was written by Takahashi Takako, and is about a mother who hates her daughter for her similarity to herself. The second story called *The Smile of a Mountain Witch*, was written by Oba Minako, and describes the life of a mountain witch living among humans. Significant portions of the story revolve around the mountain witch's complicated relationship with her mother and daughter.

The first chapter of this essay deals with the mother daughter relationship in *Congruent Figures*. The first paragraph focuses on how the daughter's puberty affects her mother's sexuality. In the second chapter I argue that the mother's hate is partly a result of the fear of the uncanny, considering the daughter's strong similarity to her mother. In the third paragraph about *Congruent Figures* I focus on the psychological reproduction of motherhood, from mother to daughter. The second chapter of this essay deals with the two key relationships in *The Smile of the Mountain Witch*, that of the mother and the protagonist, and that of the protagonist and her daughter. The first paragraph considers how the "otherness" of the mountain witch affects her relationship with her mother. The second paragraph shows how marriage offers the mountain witch an escape from her mother, but in turn becomes a source of oppression. The third paragraph deals with the issue of the mountain witch's death in relation with her daughter. Lastly, the fourth chapter of this essay will compare these two stories with a focus on the mirroring of mothers and daughters.