

If Lolita Could Tell

— Echoes of Nabokov in Sakuraba Kazuki's *My Man*

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This article discusses the narrative of child sexual abuse present in Kazuki Sakuraba's celebrated novel *My Man* (2007), an aspect that has been ignored by critical approaches towards this work so far. *My Man* narrates the relationship between Hana and her stepfather Jungo. Noting that discussions of this novel have focused on incest and yet ignored the child sexual abuse suffered by Hana, this article proposes observing the intertextuality with Vladimir Nabokov's worldwide famous novel *Lolita* (1955) as a mean to understand the specificities of Sakuraba's way of representing the theme of abuse in girlhood. It first discusses the difference between the two works' narrative voices to explain a shift in the status of power of the abused heroine. It then considers the problematization of the child-adult dichotomy in Sakuraba's works, highlighting the deconstruction of power relations deliberately employed to express the conflicted subjectivity of a girl affected by years of domestic abuse.

Keywords Kazuki Sakuraba(桜庭一樹), Literature about Child Abuse(児童性的虐待についての文学), Literature about Girls(少女についての文学), Comparative Literature(比較文学), Contemporary Japanese Literature(日本現代文学)

1 Introduction : Sakuraba Kazuki's writing

In recent years, it has been possible to observe a new phenomenon of women's empowerment, in which women have been fighting to have their voices heard and their stories told. This phenomenon, that had been boosted by the spread of social media in the last decade, took even greater global proportions when a number of Hollywood celebrities started sharing their experiences with sexual harassment and denouncing the perpetrators, in what became to be popularly known as the #MeToo movement in late 2017. At the same time, some audiences have been demanding more numerous and varied representation of women in traditional media (cinema, TV, literature). Within this context, turning our attention to established female writers becomes an effective way to observe this phenomenon in literature. In contemporary Japanese Literature, there are many female writers who have been not only carefully studied but are also gaining wider popularity. Sakuraba Kazuki (1971-), however, has not yet been sufficiently studied despite her achievements, such as winning the 138th edition of the Naoki Awards.

Sakuraba may not be seen as an activist feminist writer, but it is impossible to deny that throughout her career she has touched upon several sensitive themes related to gender, such as sexual and power harassment, gender roles, non-normative sexualities and gender identities, etc. She consolidated her career as a Light Novel writer in the early 2000s,¹ attracting attention with works such as the *Gosick* series (2003-), *Suitei Shōjo* (2004) and *A Lollipop or a Bullet* (2004). Since this period, Sakuraba's works have been highly evaluated for their representation of girlhoods, standing out from the stereotypes of female characters that are predominant in other young adult fiction for boys. Next, Sakuraba broke into the so-called General Literature market, where she was quickly nominated for the Naoki Award with the novel *The Legend of the Akakuchibas* in 2007 and won the prize one year later with *My Man*.

My Man was originally serialized in the literary magazine *Bessatsu Bungei*

¹ Light Novel is a category of Japanese young adult literature that is mainly associated with manga, anime and games, not only by its use of manga style illustrations, but also in the narrative stance theorized by Ōtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki as "anime/manga-like realism" and "game-like realism" (See Azuma Hiroki, *Otaku : Japan's Database Animals*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009). As there is no consensus on the definition of Light Novel, for the purpose of identification in this study "Light Novel" refers to any work published under known Light Novel prints, as opposed to mainstream prints which are referred as General Literature (as commonly used in Light Novel Studies and in the publishing market).

Shunjū from September 2006 to July 2007, and later compiled into a hardcover edition (October 2007) and a pocket edition (April 2010). In 2014 it was adapted into movie by the director Kumakiri Kazuyoshi, which won the 69th Mainichi Film Awards and the Golden George in the 36th Moscow International Film Festival. Divided into six chapters with alternating narrators, the novel tells the story of the incestuous relationship between Hana and her stepfather Kusarino Jungo and the murders committed by them to protect this secret. The narrative is told backwards, starting from Hana's marriage with a young man at the age of twenty-four, and ending with the moment that she lost her family in a tsunami and is adopted by Jungo when she was nine. An important twist of the narrative is the revelation that Hana was actually Jungo's illegitimate biological daughter.

Previous critical accounts of *My Man* have predominantly focused on the controversy of incest (using terms such as 近親相姦, 父子相姦, インセストタブー, etc), however there is barely any interpretation of Hana as a victim of child sexual abuse. The closest anyone came to that interpretation was when the Naoki Award committee member Watanabe Junichi claimed that Sakuraba's novel fails to represent the "post-traumatic sense of guilt experienced by girls expressed in reports of incest cases in the US", and that it depicts the incestuous relationship in a similar style to girl comics (p.36)², implying that the text romanticizes it. Notice, however, that again the word used is "incest" and not "abuse".

Additionally, comparative approaches to this novel have mainly taken into account works that the author herself cited as inspiration, such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96), Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), and Kurahashi Yumiko's *Saint Girl* (1965), that she regards as one of the most important girl's novels (*shōjo shōsetsu*) in Japan, as well as Lee Chang-dong's 1999 film, *Peppermint Candy*, that Sakuraba said influenced her decision of telling the story in retrospect³. However, it is odd that, being a story that revolves around sexual activities between father (adult) and daughter (child), no comparison has been made with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), one of the great novels of the 20th century and probably the most influential (and scandalous) one on this matter. This comparison seems inevitable especially given the presence of the term 'roriita' (ロリータ) in Japanese language and popular culture.

² Watanabe, Junichi, Dai 138kai Naoki Sanjugosho Kettei Happyo. (*Oru Yomimono*, Mar. issue, 2008), p.36.

³ Sakuraba, Kazuki, *Sakuraba, Kazuki : Monogatari Shōjo to Yaju*. (Kadokawa Shoten, 2008), pp.62-63.

It is important to point out that abuse (including sexual violence) has been a common theme in Sakuraba's previous works since her time as a Light Novel writer for young male audiences. *Gosick*, her most successful work, is a detective series that involves several cases of abduction of children and young girls. The heroine herself, the teenage detective Victorique, is confined by her own father, who in the past had also abducted and forcefully impregnated her mother at young age. Moreover, *A Lollipop or a Bullet* narrates the tragic story of the junior high-school girl Mokuzu, whose disturbed personality and aggressive traits foreshadow her fate of being murdered and having her corpse disposed of in the mountains by her own father. Furthermore, in *Suitei Shōjo* the protagonist Kana impulsively kills her stepfather whom she implies had sexually harassed her in the past, and runs away to Tokyo with a mysterious girl to escape the consequences of her crime. Likewise, *An Unsuitable Job for a Girl* (2005) is the story of two girls that help each other in a plan to murder one's father and the other's (fake) relative, whom they (accurately) fear are capable of violent acts.

It is possible to observe Sakuraba's girls through the concept of "Bad Girls", as extensively defined and discussed in Miller and Bardsley (2005). In their Introduction, Miller and Bardsley present Bad Girls as follows

Women who defy patriarchies, whether they are interpreted as liberatory models or serious malefactors, provoke intense concern, censure, and public debate. Visibly transgressive, they direct attention to the borders of property even as they threaten to alter them. Worse still, they can make deviance look fun, as if they are devils at play, as if they revel in being Bad Girls. (*Bad Girls of Japan*, p.1)

It is true that many of Sakuraba's characters show some kind of *badness*, either by committing crimes, or engaging in transgressive sexual activities, or simply by not behaving as is expected of a girl. It is clear, however, that the use of the adjective 'bad' here is ironic and critical. They add "We think that many so-called Bad Girls in this volume... are not themselves intrinsically bad, at least from our feminist perspective. Rather, their badness was attributed to them by a sexist and male-dominated society that has attempted to define, limit and control women." (*Bad Girls of Japan*, p.1).

Nevertheless, even this ironic and empowering reading of the expression 'Bad Girl' may not fit for some characters, like Kōya (from an homonymous series of

novels) or Nanakamado (*Shōjo Nakamado to Shichinin no Kaiwasō na Otona*), who do not really present any strong transgressive elements. Thus, it would be more appropriate to say that Sakuraba's works, similar to Miller and Bardsley's project, "add[s] to the range and panoply of possibilities that have existed for women in Japan"⁴ in this era. Sakuraba gives a voice to a myriad of girlhoods, she shows girls deeply involved in cycles of violence, she represents the despairing and apathic sensibility of Heisei(1989-2019) youth from a subjective reality that is permeated by the expressions of manga-like realism⁵.

In this article I will highlight the intertextuality between Sakuraba's *My Man* and Nabokov's *Lolita*, in order to shed light upon the aspect of child abuse in Sakuraba's novel. When contrasted with *Lolita*, it is possible to notice that by shifting the narrative perspective, Sakura provides Hana with an agency that Dolores was deprived of by Humbert's narration. In addition, Sakuraba plays with the child and adult dichotomy to depict the degeneration of Hana's subjectivity. Ultimately, through this analysis it is argued that far from romanticizing the father and daughter incestuous relationship, this novel portrays the degeneration of Hana's mind due to the abuse she suffered from a very young age.

2 The presence of Lolita in Japanese Language and Popular Culture

Lolita (1955), the most renowned novel by the Russian author Vladimir Nabokov, was originally published in English after he moved to the United States. The novel consists of Humbert Humbert's confessions, where he details the origins of his sexual interest for what he called 'nymphets', his trajectory that leads him to meet Dolores Haze (whom he calls Lolita), his involvement with the girl, and his murder of Clare Quilty, who 'stole' Lolita from him. The novel is exclusively narrated from Humbert's perspective (edited by a fictional editor) and is often interpreted as a model of the 'unreliable narrator' technique. Humbert's depictions of his physical involvement with his underage stepdaughter and his extenuation of his culpability have caused numerous controversies in its reception until now. This novel clearly exemplifies the discourse of the tolerance of sexual assault in a

⁴ Miller and Bardsley's words cited above originally describe the purpose of their own project (See Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, *Bad Girls of Japan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p.8). The sentence was only appropriated by the author of this article to help us understanding a feature of Sakuraba's writing.

⁵ As theorized by Ōtsuka Eiji (2003) and Azuma Hiroki (2007).

male-dominated society.

In Japan, the first translation of *Lolita*, by Ōkubo Yasuo, was published in 1959, and, directly or not, the work caused a significant cultural impact, as the title was lexicalized in the term *roriita*⁶ (ロリータ), commonly adopted by subculture communities from the late 80s, such as in Lolita and Gothic Lolita (ゴスロリ) street fashion, and the “lolita characters” present in *otaku* subculture. While Lolita fashion is a subculture strictly connected with young girls, the *otaku* subculture is a predominantly masculine space, where the so-called lolita characters are designed to entertain the masculine gaze. Knowing that Sakuraba initiated her career as a writer for this young male audience, and that she has the representation of girlhoods as her agenda, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Sakuraba is familiar with the concept of *roriita*. In fact, a quick overview of her most well-known works can confirm this. The heroines in *A Lolipop or a Bullet* for example, wear clothes and accessories that resemble Gothic Lolita style, and the protagonist of *Gosick*, Victorique, has become one of the most iconic Gothic Lolita characters in Light Novel media⁷. It is no secret that Sakuraba has been inspired by 19th century European and American literature, especially Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and detective novel writers, such as Poe and Conan Doyle. Those same elements constitute the imagery of the Gothic Lolita subculture. Nevertheless, one might assert that Nabokov’s novel has done little more than lend its name to a subculture that is more related to a Gothic Europe than to the mid-twentieth century United States described by the Russian novelist.

In fact, the Japanese term *roriita* now has only a vague resemblance to its origin in Nabokov’s novel. According to Yokota Murakami (2006)⁸ the term was introduced in Japan by the translation of Russell Trainer’s *The Lolita Complex* (1966) in the 1970s, and it was popularized in the 1980s, when the *lolicon* phenomenon was consolidated in Japanese *otaku* media. Although the introduction of the term into Japanese language was intermediated by Trainer’s book, there are undeniable connections between the comprehension of the Japanese word *roriita* and the definition of *nymphet* given by Humbert Humbert in the first chapters of

⁶ It was opted to use the romanization of the katakana word, *roriita*, when referring directly to the Japanese term, and use the English adapted, *lolita*, when applied in context.

⁷ She is used as model example by Shinjo Kazuma in his explanation about Character Stereotypes in Light Novels. See Shinjo, Kazuma *Light Novel 'Cho' Nyumon* (Softbank Creative, 2006), pp.149-150.

⁸ Yokota Murakami, Takayuki, *Daigosho Lolita Complex no Keiyugaku: Imoto Moe no Kigen. (Manga wa Yokubo Suru. Chikuma Shobo, 2006)*, pp.117-138.

Nabokov's novel.

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate "nymphets". (*The Annotated Lolita*, p.16.)

Referring to this passage, Yokota remarks that magazines in which *lolicon* material were published in the 80s would present characters in the same age range (nine to fourteen)⁹. Furthermore, this 'not human' / 'demoniac' nature that is part of the definition of a nymphet is also present in the Gothic Lolita subculture. Notice, however, that in Humbert's definition, this 'demoniac' nature is not more than a figure of speech, or in other words, a victim blaming discourse used by him to withdraw from the responsibility of his (criminal) perversion, while Gothic Lolita subculture, on the other hand, plays with it as an element of fantasy and escapism.¹⁰

3 Issues of narrative perspective and agency

We can start comparing Sakuraba's *My Man* and Nabokov's *Lolita* by considering their titles and consequently thinking about the issue of the narrator. In Nabokov's novel, the title *Lolita* refers to the nickname that Humbert calls his stepdaughter and object of desire Dolores Haze. As mentioned above, the story is told uniquely from Humbert's perspective, which leads to a common interpretation of it as an example of unreliable narrator. It would be no exaggeration to say that the reader never gets to know the actual Dolores. As we can see close to the end of the novel, when Humbert finally is reunited with Dolores after over three years, he realizes how little he knows about her. He writes "and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind" (*The Annotated Lolita*, p.284).

If the narrator confesses that he does not know anything about her mind, so it can be said about the reader, who only knows her through his descriptions. In other

⁹ Yokota, Murakami Takayuki, Daigosho Lolita Complex no Keiyūgaku: 'Imoto Moe' no Kigen. (*Manga wa Yokubo Suru*. Chikuma Shobo, 2006), p.123.

¹⁰ This article refers to both (Gothic) Lolita subculture and Lolicon subculture respecting their differences and independence from each other, but also contemplates the interrelations between them.

words, we only know Lolita, the idealized image of Dolores created by Humbert's desire, and never the girl herself with all her complexities. We do not even know if the actions and conversations narrated by Humbert are reliable since they are biased by the narrator's subjectivity. Due to this asymmetrical relation, the novel has been interpreted contradictorily, some have understood that Lolita seduced Humbert, while others have understood that Humbert not only sexually assaulted and psychologically threatened Dolores repeatedly, but also manipulated his memories in his discourse to withdraw from his own guilt, in the same way that he blamed young girls for being attractive to him, by saying that they have a "nymphic nature". The latter interpretation finds support in Humbert's words that follow the previous citation.

I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais! And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller." (*The Annotated Lolita*, pp.284-285)

In this moment, Humbert confesses being guilty of violence ("I was despicable and brutal") and indicates that he was aware of Dolores's negative feelings towards him. However, at the same time, he tries to justify his acts as 'love'. Humbert's violence is not restricted to physical and psychological abuse. By having absolute control of the narrative, Humbert seizes Dolores' possibilities to tell her side of the story. Earlier in his confessions, Humbert claims that he has "only words to play with" (*The Annotated Lolita*, p. 32), Dolores, on the other hand, does not have even words, she is merely an object of Humbert's desire, deprived of any agency, imprisoned by his words being only able to appear as Lolita through Humbert's narration.

Regarding Sakuraba's novel, the title *My Man* can be interpreted as an antithesis of the title *Lolita*, as it expresses a shift of the positions of subject and object. The phrase "my man" is used by the heroine Hana when referring to her stepfather Jungo. As mentioned before, in this novel the role of narrator is alternated between chapters among four different characters. Among them, Hana narrates the three longest chapters, including the first and the last, thus it can be said that she is the main narrator as she narrates more than half of the story. As Sakuraba is a female writer with a history of writing stories about family abuse

from the perspective of young girls, just by the synopsis of this novel, one might expect that *My Man* would be a reversed version of *Lolita's* story, in which the author denounces the sexual abuse committed by the father, and exposes social issues like the victim blaming fabricated by Nabokov's narrator (and later reinforced by the movie adaptations of the story by Stanley Kubrick [1962] and Adrian Lyne [1997]). Nevertheless, that is not the case.

As can be said about Sakuraba's previous accounts on the theme of family abuse, she often shifts the perspective and tells the story through the eyes of the abused child, however she rarely put her characters in a passive position of absolute victim (object) of violence. Even in the tragic story of Mokuzu, assassinated by her own father, the girl's discourse denies her position as a victim. The same happens to Hana. That is because no matter how imprisoned and violently abused Sakuraba's female characters are, they always own their voices and maintain their agency throughout the narratives. On the contrary, in *My Man*, Jungo is the one who most of the time only appears in the third person (except for the only chapter in which he is a narrator). On a superficial level Hana not only does not present herself as a victim of abuse, she also understands her relationship with Jungo as love. However, with careful observation of the narrative it is possible to recognize signs that indicate the abusive nature of their relationship.

First and foremost, when Jungo first initiates sexual contact with Hana she is only nine years old, and despite the fact that she narrates and depicts it as consensual, she also admits that she did not even understand the meaning of 'desire'. Moreover, in the first chapter, that takes place when Hana is already a twenty-four-year-old woman, she ruminates about their sexual activities as follows :

Eventually our lips touch again. And when they separate, at last, we take a breath at the same time. Now there was no longer any desire here. From now on, there was nowhere to go. Long ago, there was a time when I felt it was my obligation to satisfy this man's desire. I was still a child. Even though he was an adult, Jungo was annoying like a dog. He would take forever to finish it. But that is already far away in the past. The only things left here now, are the smell and our lips. (*Watashi no Otoko*, p.22)¹¹

The citation above elucidates that Hana holds mixed feelings towards Jungo.

¹¹ Translations by the author of this article.

She declares in many moments that she loves him and wants to satisfy him, but at the same time she develops a feeling of discomfort towards him. Those mixed feelings are more acutely expressed in the second chapter in a conversation between Hana and her future husband Yoshirō. Hana says, “My father is the worst”, but then she adds, “He is the worst, but he is the best” (*Watashi no Otoko*, pp. 86-87).

Furthermore, Hana clearly knows that her father’s actions are culpable. After the first sexual contact, Jungo asks her “Don’t you hate me?” (*Watashi no Otoko*, p. 370), involuntarily suggesting to her that his action (the sexual assault) is blameworthy. In the chapter that takes place when Hana is sixteen, she acknowledges that Jungo’s sexual conduct is not only immoral, but also criminal : “If people know [about the sexual relationship between her and Jungo] my dad might be sent to jail” (*Watashi no Otoko*, p. 189). The immorality of the sexual acts is reiterated even further in the scene of confrontation between Hana and the elder of the village, Ōshio. In this scene, after having witnessed a sexual intercourse, Ōshio approaches the young Hana and tries to persuade her to escape from Jungo and stay under his protection. Ōshio’s concern, however, is not necessarily about Hana being a victim of child abuse, but because he is one of the few people who knows that Hana is Jungo’s biological daughter. In other words, his discourse is condemning the incestuous nature of their relationship, not the child sexual abuse. Ōshio declares that he does not think that Hana is a *bad girl*, but he points out that Hana and Jungo’s relationship is taboo. In this scene, despite Ōshio is trying to protect Hana, his words reveal that more than trying to save her from her father’s abuse, he is trying to save her from the sin of incest. He does not blame her because he disregards her comprehension of moral values due to her age, but he recognizes her agency, her position as a subject as he tries to persuade her out of that situation.

As we can see, in comparison to Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in *My Man* not only has Sakuraba shifted the narrative perspective, but by doing so, she builds up agency for her young female character, releasing her from a one-sided oppressed position. Unlike Dolores, Hana is given a voice, an opportunity to express her own feelings, while Nabokov’s character remains a prisoner of Humbert’s discourse. All the expressions of Dolores’s subjectivity, including the suggestions of her immoral and insubordinate behavior, are a product of Humbert’s gaze, making her a puppet within his discourse. In addition, Sakuraba applies another of her main literary

themes to twist the common interpretation of the story : the deconstruction of adult and child power positions.

4 Deconstructing the adult and child dichotomy

Knowing that Sakuraba consolidated her career writing Light Novels targeted at young male audiences, it makes sense that many of her stories play with the opposition of adults and children. In Sakuraba's works this dichotomy is mainly expressed in two different forms.

4.1 Direct conflicts between adults and children

Not only has Sakuraba portrayed various cases of family abuse in works like *Gosick*, *A Lollipop or a Bullet*, *Suitei Shōjo* and *An Unsuitable Job for a Girl*, but she also draws upon conflicts between ideologies and logics of characters of different generations or ages. In *Suitei Shōjo*, for example, besides getting involved in physical violence with her abusive stepfather, the protagonist Kana also has a problematic relationship with her mother and is antagonized by various adults who try to capture her throughout the novel. In *Gosick*, Victorique and Kujo, two teenagers, find themselves in the middle of an espionage plot between the Ministry of the Occult (presided over by Victorique's father) and the Academy of Sciences (that represents the interests of the king). The children notice that both sides of the polar opposition are corrupt and that this conflict is leading to a war, thus they confront both and stand out in the story as the only figures of hope for the future. This hope is ultimately expressed when they, allegorically, leave the old continent (Europe) behind and start a new life in the so-called 'New World' (U.S.). Just to give one more example, the conflict of generations is also central to *The Legend of the Akakuchibas*, as the novel goes through the life of three generations of women of that family, and it draws upon the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters.

Similarly, in *My Man*, Sakuraba portrays different conflicts between adults and children that go beyond the sexual abuse suffered by Hana. The most obvious of

these is the murder of Ōshio by Hana. There is a long moral argument between the two of them that culminates in Ōshio's death. Ōshio is the elder of the village, and he represents a sense of conservative authority. He is the one who brings the notion of 'sin' to Hana and Jungo's relationship.

"We are not just relatives. He is my real father. I figured it out."

"Even though you know it, you have been doing those filthy things. All this time. You...!"

"Leave me alone."

I thought that maybe the reason we had been doing these filthy things was because we are father and daughter, but I couldn't put it into words very well. It came to my mind: Jungo's dark complexion when, every night before touching and soiling his daughter's skin, he kneels and hangs his head down just like a prayer. Just like a prayer. Our love ritual.

The daughter is the father's filthy goddess...

[...] ¹²

Surrounded in white light, I roared violently.

Like a beast.

"Is there anything in this world that cannot be done between a father and a daughter?" like a beast.

"Even though we are the most important person to each other." Like a beast

"After all, we are connected by our blood. We are different from everyone else. There is nothing we cannot do. As father and daughter."

Mr. Ōshio yelled back. Full of conviction, he put his all in those words.

"There are!"

"Shut up!"

"You don't understand because you are just a child. In this world there are things one must not do. There are lines one must not cross. It's all decided by god."

(*Watashi no Otoko*, pp.217-218)

Hana at this moment feels that her relationship with Jungo, which is the only form of 'love' she knows, is threatened by Ōshio's authority. She argues in favor of her relationship, and in a sense, in favor of her freedom opposed to social /cultural/religious rules. Ōshio, on the other hand, stands as an adult sure of his moral beliefs, appealing to religious imagery as a base for his discourse. Ōshio describes Hana and Jungo's relationship as 'filthy' (「汚らわしい」) and asserts that this relationship goes against 'god's will' (「神様が決めた」)¹³. Hana's mind may

¹² Excerpt of the text omitted by the author of this article.

work with a different set of moral values, but still her self-understanding leads to a contradictory image, as she describes herself as her father's 'filthy goddess' (「父の穢れた神」), defining their relationship at the same time as sacred and profane.

Another expression of conflict between children and adults is the antagonistic relationship between Hana and Komachi. Komachi used to be Jungo's girlfriend (or perhaps sexual partner) before Hana's adoption. Initially, she saw the little girl as a rival, due to the dissolution of their affair after the arrival of the stepdaughter. The hostility between the two characters is introduced at the end of the first chapter, when Hana, returning from her honeymoon trip, is asked by Komachi to go to Jungo's old house. When she arrives there Hana introduces Komachi as follows :

She was an acquaintance that I hadn't seen in a while. She was one of the few people who knew my stepfather and me very well from before we escaped to Tokyo. I have hated this auntie since I was a child. She also hated me. Even though she was an adult she didn't even try to hide it. That was a long time ago. At that time, I was a child and she was a young and beautiful lady. But now the tables have turned. I am young and beautiful, and she has become tremendously ugly. However, when our eyes met it was obvious that we still hated each other. (*Watashi no Otoko*, p.54)

This contact not only introduces the feeling of hatred between the two characters, but Hana's words highlights the age gap, and consequently the conflict between their generations. Even though we are talking about a dichotomy of child-adult, this quote makes it clear that there is another dichotomy within the sphere of 'adulthood', the difference between adult and aged. Twenty-four-year-old narrator Hana esteems the youth and beauty of adulthood, in contrast to both the immaturity of her own childhood and the deteriorated 'ugliness' of aged Komachi. Perhaps it is more correct to say that the character affirms her own current position (age) in contrast to others.

In a similar way, we can read the contrast between Jungo and Yoshirō, as Jungo is Hana's older lover, and Yoshirō is a man of her age with whom she gets married. The animosity between the two of them is implied in the first chapter, but it is in the second chapter, narrated by Yoshirō, that it is more clearly expressed. Yoshirō brings Hana home drunk after a date and finds himself trapped with Jungo

¹³ It was opted to translate the word 'god' without capital letter because the novel does not present a clear religious ideology.

in their living room. Yoshirō fears Jungo because he has heard from Hana that her father punched a man who got close to her before. Even after Jungo explains that he punched that man because Hana was annoyed by him, and that this was not the case with Yoshirō, the young man, as narrator, confesses to the reader that he remained scared, but did not hate the old man (*Watashi no Otoko*, p.106).

Finally, it is also possible to highlight the hostility between Hana and her original family. In the last chapter where Hana narrates the disaster that killed her family and the moment of her adoption by Jungo, she starts by expressing how she felt like an outsider in that family, how she rarely talked with her father and how her father's relatives treated her differently from her siblings. Later in this chapter it is revealed that she is Jungo's illegitimate daughter, which explains the discomfort that she felt from the family and relatives. When a tsunami starts destroying their hometown, Hana's father carries her to safety, but what initially looks like an act of love (protecting Hana), finally reinforces her feeling of non-belongingness to the family when he leaves her in safety and goes back to die with his wife and children who were still in the danger area.

4.2 Blurring lines and twisting logic

Another way that Sakuraba expresses the age dichotomy is by creating ambivalent characters. The most emblematic example is *Gosick's* Victorique. She is fourteen years old, however, her looks, attitude and aura are completely at odds with her age. Victorique is small and has delicate features, which makes her look like a child. Her doll-like clothing and her craving for sweets, along with a sense of innocence towards mundane subjects and her self-centered personality, only accentuates the childish side of the character. On the other hand, Victorique is an extremely intelligent detective with a keen eye. Her previously mentioned doll-like clothes are old-fashioned, and her husky voice accentuates the supernatural aura of an aged lady (like a sage or a witch). Therefore, Victorique performs simultaneously, and sometimes through the same signs, both as child and as aged person. It is also typical of Sakuraba's more innocent young female characters to comment on a friend of the same age who appears to be more mature (such as the protagonist Kōya in the homonymous novel series).

Moving back to the analysis of *My Man* in comparison to *Lolita*, the heroines of both novels are portrayed as embodying both childish and adult signs. As Humbert is bewitched by Lolita's 'nymphet' nature, he always highlights her childish behaviors and appearance. However, he also describes some moments of mature behavior, essentially when he tries to convince the reader that Lolita was aware of and actively participated in sexual intercourse. Similarly, Hana also oscillates between child and mature roles. However, here, the duality of the character is taken into extremes, as she is called 'mom' by Jungo during their sexual contact.

The emphasis on Hana's duality is also present in the chapter narrated by Komachi. First, Komachi describes her as : "Pale skin and black hair. With her uniform also kind of white and plain, for me the always obedient Hana, just like this town adorned by snow and the black sea, was a boring kid" (*Watashi no Otoko*, p.279). This description highlights Hana's stereotypical *girlishness*, remarking on signs of purity (pale skin, white and plain clothes) and on her obedient personality, that Komachi ultimately considers boring.

However, later in that chapter Komachi witnesses Jungo holding Hana and calling her 'mom'. In that moment, Komachi narrates as follows :

In that moment, Hana's smile deepened, showing a tolerance unexpected for a child, and continued stroking her stepfather's head from the top to the bottom. I threw the melted chocolate in my hand on the floor. Who is the adult and who is the child? A young girl with a smile resembling mother's love... This was a grotesque spectacle as I never saw elsewhere. (*Watashi no Otoko*, p.284)

This metaphorical shift of positions between Jungo and Hana works to symbolically relativize the abuse, blurring the outlines and deconstructing the structures of power that configure a relation of abuse. However, that should not result in the conclusion that Sakuraba is romanticizing the pedophilic nature of the story. The tone of the whole narrative can be summarized by Hana's statements : "He is the worst, but he is the best". The novel expresses exactly this ambivalence and contradiction that remains in Hana's mind. Nonetheless, we may not forget that Hana has been sexually abused by Jungo since she was nine years old, when she had just lost her family, with whom she never could develop any bonds of love. She acquired her concept of 'love' in her contact with Jungo. Therefore, it is

possible to say that Hana's understanding of love has been corrupted from the start.

For Hana violence is ordinarily part of her reality, it is how she sees, understands and acts on the world. She has been experiencing this violence even before Jungo's sexual assaults. There was the psychological violence of feeling excluded by her own family, then there was the tsunami, a violent force of nature, that took her out of her ordinary life, leaving her lonely in the world, where she was 'kindly' received by Jungo. Moments before the tsunami, Hana is reflecting about her feeling of non-belonging as follows :

Somewhere in my heart I have always felt that here is not my place, that there is somewhere else I'm really meant to be. Maybe other girls imagine things like this too when they are sad, though. I kept staring at the ocean lost in my thoughts that someone would come for me, someone who knows me so well. (*Watashi no otoko*, p.299)

Hana's escapist fantasy become her reality as the tsunami destroys her town and take the lives of all her family members. And in this escapist fantasy Hana's mind twists logic and blurs the lines to the point of mistaking violence for love, and not being able to distinguish between sacred and profane. A careful education and psychological support might have helped Hana out of this distorted subjectivity, however Jungo, also trapped in his own cycle of violence, connects with Hana through the darkness and loneliness of their hearts, aggravating the corruption of her mind. In this already corrupted state-of-mind, when the materiality of the blood relation with Jungo is revealed, instead of this turning into an issue that could perhaps make her reject the incestuous relationship, it actually becomes a reassuring force that Jungo is the "someone" that Hana has been waiting to come for her.

The whole process of the corruption of Hana's mind could only be expressed in this novel because of the first-person narrator that describes her reality from a twisted subjective view. In *Lolita*, on the other hand, Dolores was deprived such complexity by Humbert's narration. In Nabokov's novel, Lolita's dualities and contradictions are not as much an expression of the girl's disturbed or corrupted subjectivity, but more likely a product of the narrator's fantasies and desires that objectify Dolores and idealize her as Lolita, and manipulate the narrative to attest to the narrator's innocence. Ultimately, Humbert tries to justify the abuse he commits

by building a victim-blaming discourse, and tries to gain the readers' sympathy to justify the murder he commits in a passionate revenge. One could only argue that he has a twisted mind corrupted by the cycle of violence, like Hana, had he not demonstrated an extremely high intelligence and manipulative behavior throughout the whole novel.

5 Conclusion

A simplistic reading of *My Man* might lead one to understand it as a grotesque and taboo love story between a father and a daughter whose main function is to shock the audience. It is not difficult to find online comments of readers who have abandoned the novel because they were horrified or disgusted by Sakuraba's raw and crude style. Similarly to *Lolita*, the movie adaptation of *My Man* can also reinforce this interpretation, as it misses the nuances of the narrators' voices, and makes considerable changes in the plot and its structure. In the movie, the story is reorganized chronologically, starting with Jungo kindly taking Hana under his protection after she lost her family in a tsunami and ending in the scene where Jungo dines with Hana and her fiancé, before Jungo's death. Additionally, there is a big change in the development of Hana and Jungo's sexual activities. While in the novel there is clearly sexual intercourse when Hana is still nine years old, the movie only shows Hana putting her father's finger in her mouth and laughing, in a naughty yet innocent way. No sexual intercourse is implied until Hana is sixteen, and this moment is already followed by Hana's confrontation with Ōshio.

However, when we analyze this novel through the kaleidoscope of Sakuraba's oeuvre and highlight the elements of abuse in comparison with Nabokov's *Lolita*, it is possible to reveal the contradictory structure with which Sakuraba chose to tell this story. In her agenda of representing a diversity of girlhoods in her literature, Sakuraba avoids easy formulas. She does not present a one-dimensional story of realization and suffering of sexual abuse. Instead, Sakuraba narrates the story from the perspective of a girl raised in an environment with twisted moral values, who therefore, could not know that she was a victim of abuse. Even after reaching adulthood and having a better understanding of her relationship with her father, and even after Jungo's death, Hana remains in denial. Hana is aware of the harm caused by him, but she cannot leave her distorted fantasy and change the way she feels

about him, mainly because violence is the only form of ‘love’ that she has ever experienced. It is Komachi who gives us a clear description of Hana’s position as an abused child :

Jungo may have been stealing something from that kid. Something with no shape. Something important. Something like a soul.

One who grows up deprived of this thing develops a huge hollow. They turn into adults who steal from others to survive. That person may be like that. He is an adult, but he did not become ripe, he only became rotten. So, I will wait no more. Ah, I really will just give up.

But, how about Hana...

The little town in the north being pillaged. While the catch of fish is decreasing, the bank is also on the verge of a crisis. This child was brought here. This powerless weak child smelling like sweet milk. People from this town unconsciously noticed the girl’s pitiable circumstances, being continuously violated. Maybe that’s why they are so tender to her.

Or maybe, everybody also wants to steal from her. Her youth and softness. That weak person’s innocent soul. While stroking. While cherishing. While watching over with a smile. They still may...

Want to steal from her... (*Watashi no otoko*, p.292)

Just as Komachi predicts, Hana, who has grown up having her innocence violated, does not ripen, she rots. It is in the very ideograms of Hana and Jungo’s family name (腐野, ‘rotten field’). Hana, like many of Sakuraba’s other heroines, gets trapped in a cycle of violence. From victim, she turns into criminal. And like Nabokov’s *Lolita*, she seeks for a way out of the cycle by getting married to a man of the same age, and forcefully adjusting to social norms. It is, perhaps, exactly this whirlpool of violence that Sakuraba wants her readers to experience. Instead of adopting a sober realistic narrative style and denouncing child abuse and its effects on one’s psyche, she drowns the reader in this girl’s disturbed sensitivity that can only express her conflicted and delusional subjective reality.

A further investigation of Sakuraba’s works exploring her relations with manga-like realism and magical realism aesthetics and themes could help ground Sakuraba’s form of expression as a way of using literary tools and sociocultural stereotypes to represent transgressive girlhoods that are present in Japanese society of the Heisei era. In other words, it can be said that Sakuraba builds readers’ expectations with popular themes or imagery (such as crime stories or *moe*) only to

give voice, deep within her text, to the representation of gender minorities. And she does so in such a skillful way that her stories end up crossing the borders of genre and being accepted by a wider variety of readers.

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