

Naomi Lemon

Satomi Saito

JAPN 4990

12/2/2020

Do Lesbian Manga Bury Their Gays?

In American Media there is a trope referred to the “Bury your Gays” trope. This a commonly depicted phenomenon that acts as a form of censorship to keep homosexual relationships “vague” or “unfulfilled” out of disapproval for them. Just like western media, there is a strong tradition and history behind homosexual relationships in Japanese media, but Japanese media does not always fall into this common trope, and in fact has historically subverted it.

Lesbian manga in Japan arguably began with *Shiroi Heya no Futari* by Yamagishi Ryoko in 1971, however the original influence by Yoshiya Nobuko’s lesbian S-Class novels cannot be ignored. Published in 1919, *Yaneura no Nishojo* became what is now considered to be the original influence for modern lesbian manga. During this time period, S-Class relationships, also known as sister or shojo relationships, became common enough in Japan that novels depicting these relationships flourished as well. These relationships were normalized, but not considered to be serious and were shoved aside as a precursor to the “real” relationships a woman would be expected to foster later in life. Nobuko’s journey began depicting similar stories as early as 1916 with her short story series *Hana Monogastari* and cemented specific tropes within female relationships in manga into modern day. Even more refreshing in *Yaneura no Nishojo* was the depiction of these girls moving on in life together, living happily in a relationship previously depicted to be a phase. However, with the decline in girl’s only schools, a ban on S-Class

literature was enacted in 1936 alongside certain depictions of heterosexual relationships in shojo magazines. This ban was lifted after WWII, and with it, came the slow revitalization of this unique genre.

It seems there was a dark period of lesbian relationships in manga due to the ban on the subject that, combined with societal pressures at the time, left a lasting effect on these stories. In the words of Fujimoto Yukari, “Marriage was usually something parents imposed on girls with or without the girls’ agreement. Therefore, in the limited time before marriage, girls desired the only love that they could freely choose for themselves: the fantasy of love between girls. And they savored it.” (Pg. 26) We can see these feelings reciprocated in Nobuko’s story *Yellow Rose* where a she says, “The sadness of those who love their own sex and therefore cannot live their lives in the form of a conventional marriage is redoubled by the chagrin of parents—for whom marriage represents the sole pinnacle of womanly achievement—and the opprobrium and scorn of everyone else.” (Location 581) The very common imagery of two girls alone in a shared room or a tower, an all-girl school, and the imagery of western flowers, all begun by Nobuko, can be seen in S-Class manga such as *Yellow Rose*, *Rose of Versailles*, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, and so many more.

With this came the seemingly typical tragic endings of betrayal, societal pressure, sacrifice, suicide, and depression that picked up once again in S-Class manga during the 70s, when female writers took over shojo. In *Shiroi Heya no Futari*, social pressures pushing back against the abnormality of the relationship leads to suicide. In *Futaripotchi*, the girls commit suicide together after discovering one was the product of rape. In *Maya no Souretsu*, the girls learn they are in fact half-sisters and one commits suicide. *Ibutachi no Heya* features a relationship scorned by society and blackmail which also leads to suicide. Despite the very real

depiction of the erasure of these characters through tragic means, there is a distinction that can be made between the western concepts of expendability of homosexual characters and what appears to be a long list of girl/girl relationships that have formed their own tropes and carved a style through time. In the west, commonly discussed examples of the “Bury Your Gays” trope includes side characters mostly irrelevant to the story, with the context of a sparse library of homosexual relationships depicted in media to collectively look through. Though whether S-Class stories are fully lesbian stories, true sisterhood, or simply platonic relationships with a heavy queer flavor, the representation exists and was very explicitly recognized and normalized in Japanese society despite the erasure of them as “practice” relationships to prepare for marriage. These relationships taking less focus on sexual exploration appears to simply be a strong tradition and trope within the genre that does not take away from the strength of the relationships portrayed or how “real” they are without it.

Maria-Sama ga Miteru by Oyuki Konno in 1998 is believed to be what began a modern-day revival in lesbian relationships in shojo manga, specifically S-Class manga. The story calls directly back to Yoshiya Nobuko’s original tropes of an all-girl school, a special upper floor room in an isolated building, flowery imagery, and the concept of one girl who is taller, dark-haired, and mature, with a bubbly younger girl with lighter hair, who is shorter, and a bit naive. The story follows Yumi Fuzukawa and her interactions with Sachiko Ogasawara, a member of the student council, alongside other female characters at this school. Their school has a *soeur* system, or a sister system, which links older students with a student younger than them in a big-sister-little-sister-program where the younger acts as an assistant at times and the older acts as a mentor. The language surrounding this “*soeur*” system can be seen as a call to the S-Class genre itself and the description of these relationships as “sisterly.” Another interesting connection is the

constant references to flowers through the student council offices being named after roses, the little sisters being sometimes referred to as “en bouton” or “rose bud,” and the usage of a white lily in connection to the academy itself. Lilies in Japan are strongly associated with lesbian relationships in manga, sometimes also called “Yuri” which translates to “lily”.

Maria-Sama ga Miteru, despite all of its similarities with other lesbian manga at the time, brought back the positivity. The story does not revolve around some grand, terrible secret that devastates the protagonists and throws them into a suicidal depression. It revolves around the relationships the girls have with each other and their school life. That so many girls at this school are interested in relationships with other girls is not strange in this story, it’s expected. These relationships aren’t a subject of discrimination, they’re normalized and accepted in this story. Though these relationships may come and go, that is simply portrayed as a part of growing up instead of something you can never overcome. The story is happy, and celebrates its happiness, however it is not quite at the same stage as Yoshiya Nobuko’s *Yaneura no Nishojo*, where the characters expand beyond the S-Class trope where their relationship is trapped as a high school phase. In the end, the story hasn’t fully been translated or completed. The anime and the manga both end with the promise of going on a date, a step forward in Yumi and Sachiko’s relationship, but not necessarily unusual in this story. The novels continue past both of these scenes and though the subtext is there, their relationship is still stuck in school.

Aoi Hana by Shimura Takako in 2004 is yet another story about a taller dark-haired girl who is more reserved, also known as Fumi Manjoume, and Akira Okudaira, a bubbly younger girl with lighter hair who is a bit naive. Interestingly, even the hairstyles of the characters in these two stories are the same. Aoi Hana also takes place in an all-girls school where the main characters often meet in a specific room secluded from everything else- the drama club room,

and where the younger character somewhat works as an assistant for the older one, thought not strictly in this story, as Akira is a very old friend of Fumi's and her assistance comes in the form of offering advice. In this manga, the connection to the traditional S-Class relationship is called out with the background characters. At this all girl school, the background characters fall in and out of relationships with each other and some reveal their own impression of the relationship was not as serious as their ex-partner's. A prevailing theme of the story appears to be this ambivalent approach to a relationship with another girl, treating lesbian romances like a phase, and the heartbreak this can cause for those left behind. We can even observe this in the main character Akira, who refers to her relationship with Fumi as "fun and games until it got too serious." (Vol. 8, Ch. 52, Pg. 28.) It takes her until the very last pages of the last chapter to admit her true feelings for Fumi.

Despite all of this, Aoi Hana otherwise subverts the current expectations of this genre with its explicitness. Fumi has already experienced relationships with other girls- she is not a pure and innocent doll exploring in preparation for a marriage with a man, she is clearly interested in women in a serious manor. The story also brings with it a happy ending, just like *Maria-Sama ga Miteru*, however the happy ending here is not that the characters are at peace with each other, but that it is very clear that Akira and Fumi consider their relationship to be more than a platonic interest that may be explored later. They essentially start dating at the end in a more official and romantically explicit way. True to Yoshiya Nobuko's *Yaneura no Nishojo*, the relationships continue outside of school. Several girls, not just the main characters, speak of marriage and the potential for their relationships to continue into their adult lives. Taking from its predecessors in the 70s, these relationships do not exist in a vacuum where everyone is in a lesbian relationship or the extreme stress of characters being blackmailed over their secret love

for one another. Instead, the story portrays the pain of someone's love never being taken seriously by their family and friends and doing what makes them the happiest despite what society may tell them.

The deaths of lesbian characters in manga was never an attempt to censor relationships nobody approved of, it was an attempt to express the unhappiness authors felt about the societal expectations for these so-called fake relationships to end in favor of a real one later on in life. This can be seen in the common 70s ending with suicide as these characters lost hope with the world around them or after they felt they could no longer live without the other. Regardless of that trend, none of these characters were expendable, as they were the main characters the story revolved around. Their pain was the point of the story- not an excuse to write away what they felt for one another. The tropes and traditions of lesbian manga began with Yoshiya Nobuko and her first couple of stories depicting girls moving on with each other out of high school and into adulthood. With *Aoi Hana* and *Maria-Sama ga Miteru* we can see a return to these original ideas, ideas which have historically existed in Japanese media and society since the early 1900s. With this, it is safe to say that Japanese lesbian manga does not bury its gays.

Works Cited

Fujimoto Yukari, and Translated by Lucy Fraser. "Where Is My Place in the World? Early Shōjo Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism." *Mechademia*, vol. 9, 2014, pp. 25–42. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/mech.9.2014.0025. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.

Takeuchi, Kayo. "The Genealogy of Japanese 'Shōjo Manga' (Girls' Comics) Studies." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 38, 2010, pp. 81–112. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42772011. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.

Fraser, L., & Monden, M. (2017). The Maiden Switch: New Possibilities for Understanding Japanese Shōjo Manga (Girls' Comics). *Asian Studies Review*, 41(4), 544-561.
doi:10.1080/10357823.2017.1370436

Hotes, Cathy Munroe. "The Scent of Pheasant's Eye (福壽草, 1935)." *Nishikata Film Review*, 1 Jan. 1970, www.nishikata-eiga.com/2015/10/the-scent-of-pheasants-eye-1935.html.

Yoshiya Nobuko, Yellow Rose. E-book. Expanded Editions; 2nd Edition. May 23, 2016

Takako Shimura, Aoi Hana. E-book. Viz Media, November 2004.

Oyuki Konno, Maria-Sama ga Miteru. E-book. Shueisha, April 24, 1998.

Chiho Saito, Revolutionary Girl Utena, Viz Media, May 28, 1998