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Master's Thesis

"Undoing" the concept of family in Japan

Freeing women from the normative kazoku in contemporary feminist fiction

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Summary

Drawing on queer theory this thesis analyses the two 2019 short stories “Natsunoyo no kuchidzuke” and “Futari Kazoku” from the collection *Seimeishiki* by Murata Sayaka, and the second part of the 2019 novel *Natsu Monogatari* by Kawakami Mieko. The thesis attempts to answer the research question of how the selected texts free women from the heteronormative family institution by creating alternative forms of *kazoku*. First, the thesis briefly outlines the methodological approach and theoretical framework. Then, based on the insight that the heteronormative or “traditional” Japanese family is a political construct from Meiji era Japan, the thesis investigates the various discourses surrounding assisted reproductive technology (ART) that are shaping today’s Japan. It then undertakes an analysis of the selected texts. The resulting discussions will argue that both authors engage in the current discourse surrounding the normative *kazoku* by creating fictions where those who fall outside of societal norms are able to reproduce and create a family on their own. Through the appropriation of ART the stories depict alternative forms of *kazoku* such as female friendship companionship and single parenthood that the thesis argues can be seen as more favorable to women.

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1 Introduction

The thesis analyses the two 2019 short stories “Natsunoyo no kuchidzuke” and “Futari Kazoku” from the collection *Seimeishiki* by Murata Sayaka, and the second part of the 2019 novel *Natsu Monogatari* by Kawakami Mieko and attemps to answer the research question of how the selected texts free women from the heteronormative family institution by creating alternative forms of *kazoku*.

Employing literary analysis and drawing on key aspects of queer theory outlined in chapter 2, including the concepts of "kinship," "performativity," and "resignification" by Judith Butler, the thesis examines how characters, through alternative family structures, contribute to reshaping established norms.

Chapter 3 provides a contextual overview, starting with the modernization of the family unit during the Meiji period (1868-1912). It then examines the current landscape of artificial insemination with donor sperm (AID) and legal aspects of assisted reproductive technology (ART) in Japan. The chapter concludes with a summary of Japan's evolving landscapes from the 1970s to the 2000s and a presentation of the authors.

In the discussion chapters 4 and 5 the thesis argues that Murata and Kawakami are presenting their view that female friendship companionship–with or without children– and single parenthood make for a better form of *kazoku* and that these forms of family can be seen as freeing women from the contemporary normative family unit.

2 Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the research question of how the selected texts free women from the heteronormative family institution by creating alternative forms of *kazoku*, this thesis uses literary analysis, including an analysis of stylistic and thematic elements used in the selected works. It also draws on key concepts of queer theory, as developed by theorist Judith Butler. In this chapter, this methodology will be discussed.

In his exhaustive overview of literature studies, Louis Hébert (2022) outlines the essentials of

textual analysis, including methods and components "for producing an analytical text" (2022, p. 166). He also presents approximately thirty elements available to analyze the text such as themes, language, narrative, narration, and characters before exploring a range of approaches, including Marxism, Ecocriticism, and Deconstruction, that can be applied when conducting the analysis of the selected elements (Keryell, 2023, p. 2). According to Hébert, these three factors combined constitute a literary analysis (Hébert, 2022, p. 7).

Along the same lines, Hans Bertens (2014a) notes that "many in literary studies think that the two [elements and approaches] cannot be separated; when interpreting a text, one is always doing so from a theoretical perspective, whether conscious about it or not" (Keryell, 2023, p. 3). He emphasizes that the emergence of newer theories in the last four decades has significantly enhanced the analysis by challenging the persistent significance of the text, its audience, and the underlying motivations driving its interpretation (Keryell, 2023, p. 3).

Among the newer theories Bertens mentions is that of queer theory. According to him, queer theory's "point of departure is that there is no natural sexuality–a status traditionally accorded to heterosexuality–and that there is no stable relationship between biological sex […]gender, and sexual desire" (Bertens, 2014b, p. 202). And so, queer theory enables readers to examine the authenticity of characters in the text with regards to their chosen identity and the degree to which they remain true to it. (Keryell, 2023, p. 4).

Hébert asserts that "queer approaches to texts focus on "authors, characters, or formal aspects of various texts" that demonstrate (explicit or implicit) elements of queerness or resistance to normative sexualities"(Hébert, 2022, p. 124). Being difficult to define precisely, one should consider queer theory "a loose set of shared values and beliefs, rather than a strict theory" (Hammarqvist, 2021, pp. 5–6). Under I summarize the effect of applying queer theory to a text according to Jacques Khalip:

> […] when applying queer theory, we can "broaden our understanding of the traditional canon" when looking at the "in-between spaces" of texts which challenge heteronormativity. […] as opposed to texts written more recently, literature from the past addresses queerness without specifically describing it making it interesting to analyze texts from the past through the lens of queer theory. Nevertheless, [Khalip] emphasizes the importance of being careful "[…] not to subscribe to the idea that our present moment is one where we can

> stand back and presume that we now see everything very clearly" making a point that queer theory is most relevant in in literary analysis of contemporary text.
> (Keryell, 2023, p. 4)

Considering this, despite Murata and Kawakami's works being "seemingly explicit in their critique of the Japanese female condition through clear depictions of reproduction, […] birth and sex, a lot is left to examine and interpret once applying queer theory and analyzing the in-between spaces" (Keryell, 2023, p. 4) .

American philosopher and theorist Judith Butler is one of the most influential theorists within queer theory and as follows highly debated and critiqued by many scholars. Butler deals with a range of issues from gender and sex to precarity, grief and contemporary political violence. Due to Butler's extensive work and broad scope of topics the thesis will not go into on what matters or by whom she is criticized, but rather introduce some of her notions that are relevant to the analysis of the selected stories.

Butler introduced through her work *Gender Trouble* (1990) the idea of gender as something that is done, and seen by others, and therefore is performative. Departing from conventional feminist theory, Butler challenges its emphasis on categorizing women as a group and takes distance from the idea of defining gender solely as a collective category. She builds on a key concept from feminist theory—the notion of biological sex as a natural aspect. Feminist theory usually highlights how gender is socially constructed and argue that "gender belongs to the changeable realm of the social while sex and the sexed body are biologically determined" (Rubin, 1975, as cited in Kruger, 2018, p. 338). However, Butler asserts that biological sex is not natural, and rather subject to historical shifts and influenced by discursive practices. Based on French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of discourse, where discourses function as regulatory, *Gender Trouble* is a "critique of those identity categories which reify and endorse a repressive heterosexual matrix" (Butler & Salih, 2004, p. 90). According to Butler "sex and gender are alike experienced in relation to norms" (Kruger, 2018, p. 338) and it is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (2004, p. 91). Although gender is "a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (2004, p. 91) gender is not something one can perform as in a theatrical play where the actors choose their scripts, but rather the subject is "'done' by gender" (2004, p. 91).

Butler emphasizes that gender is a performance that is *repeated* that reexperiences a set of meanings that are already socially established, and also that this repetition then legitimize these established norms (2004, p. 114). However, if gender is a performance, this means that there is no true gender to depart and therefore the performance itself can also allow for other genders than the binary heterosexual male/female to exist. The potential for gender configurations to spread beyond the constrictive frameworks of mandatory heterosexuality and masculinist dominance is something we will see the characters in the selected stories 'perform'. In essence, Butler argues that the concept of 'true genders' or preexisting gender is nonexistent, contending that gender is not internalized but originates from an external attribute. She sums it up at the very end of *Gender Trouble*[1]:

> If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*.
>
> (2006, pp. 192–193)

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler supports a broader perspective on gender, questioning assumptions about societal norms and the methods marginalized communities employ to challenge them. Especially Butler's outlook on kinship and the fate of the child are useful in

[1] I read the 2006 version, but the extract is the same in her original 1990 publication.

the analysis of the selected stories as she critiques the popular opinion that “marriage is and ought to remain a heterosexual institution and bond, but also that kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognizable family form” (Butler, 2004, p. 102). She critiques the opinion that sexuality should be structured to support reproductive relations, and that marriage, giving legal status to the family form and thus reinforcing these views is positioned as the pivotal point that facilitates the mutual reinforcement of these institutions. Furthermore, Butler questions “if marriage makes it more difficult to argue in favor of the viability of alternative kinship arrangements and for the well-being of the child in alternate social forms” (Keryell, 2023, p. 5) “Looking at an ongoing debate in France over partnership rights and parenthood rights for non-heterosexuals, Butler demonstrates how the figure of the child of non-heterosexual parents becomes an anxiety for cultural norms and what she calls cultural purity” (Keryell, 2023, p. 5).

Finally, in her essay on “The Question of Social Transformation” also to be found in *Undoing Gender*, Butler acknowledged that the process of resignification alone does not consistently result in a subversive transformation of established gender norms and social power dynamics. “Resignification” must be situated within the context of radical democratic theory and questions whether the resignification can lead to a “[...] less violent [and] more inclusive population” (Butler, 2004, p. 225). In other words, by resisting the norms repeatedly, one may contribute to changing the meaning of norms rather than trying to reject them. An example of this is how the queer community has managed to change the meaning of "queer" to something positive by appropriating terms as “queer” and “drag”. By using it differently over and over, rather than refusing to use it, others have come to see that these terms can have different (more inclusive) meanings.

We will see that the characters of the selected stories take on different kinds of kinship and challenge precisely what Butler critiques, that “sexuality should be structured to support reproductive relations”. By performing new forms of *kazoku* the characters contribute to changing the meaning of established norms and encourage ‘positive’ resignification. Together, these concepts come to support my argument that the selected stories can be seen as, borrowing Butler’s word, “Undoing” the concept of family in Japan.

3 Context: Family in Modern Japan

Both selected authors grow up in a contemporary Japan where new work opportunities and technology emerge, but old ideologies remain. Not surprisingly, the authors are part of a "gender shift in literature" (McNeill, 2020a, p. 1) with their critical assessment of issues of family, work, and reproduction.

Born in 1976 (age 47) in Osaka prefecture and coming from a working-class background with an absent father (Fincher, 2023), Kawakami Mieko recounts her diverse experiences in various jobs—from factory worker to bar hostess—necessitated by the financial challenges her family faced (Levine, 2023). Despite her now flourishing career as a novelist, Kawakami reflects on the enduring class difference between the rich and poor, stating that "In most cases the rich stay rich and the poor remain poor. Even with effort you cannot always change your life, and I had this severe lesson as a child" (Rich, 2020 as cited in Levine, 2023, p. 60). On the other hand, Murata Sayaka, born in 1979 (age 44) in Inzai Chiba prefecture grew up with her brother in a conservative family, nevertheless also with an absent father due to his profession as a judge, and a caring, but worried mother (Ha, 2022). Murata and her brother were put under a lot of pressure—him to become a doctor or a judge, and her to learn domestic skills ultimately in the objective to marry—resulting in both children struggling to live up to the family's expectations (McNeill, 2020b; 板倉 Itakura, 2020).

In this chapter, I introduce the authors and look at concepts and laws that the selected stories in the thesis challenge. First, I look at the political and social construct of the "traditional" normative family with a particular focus on the *modern love ideology*, where love in marriage came to be seen as an expression of selfhood and self-development, creating male-female equality. Then I examine the current state of artificial insemination with donor sperm (henceforth AID) and laws regarding assisted reproductive technology (henceforth ART) in Japan. I argue that through rhetoric on the child's well-being, medical professionals and lawmakers deliberately promote ART as a technology reserved to heterosexual married couples and thus reinforce the idea of *kazoku* as a heteronormative and biologically related unit. Lastly, I summarize the shifting landscapes in Japan from the 1970s to the 2000s before examining the authors. There I look at the critical reception of their works nationally and internationally and examine the themes they explore and the scholarly discourse surrounding

their literary contributions. Additionally, I look at the similarities and differences that characterize the two authors' unique voices.

By getting a contextual overview, we gain an understanding of the narratives woven by Kawakami and Murata.

3.1 Family but make it modern

"Recent literature on the history of family in Japan reveals that what is commonly understood as the "traditional" Japanese family—called the *ie* family—is largely a political construct that was institutionalized in Japan's Meiji period (1868–1912)" (Ruszel, 2019, p. 21).

Originating from gendered and hierarchical Confucian social structures under the Tokugawa regime (1603 to 1867), the *ie* family is a "patrilineal family inheritance system" (Ruszel, 2019, p. 22). However, expect for the ruling class of samurais, among other social classes (which made up around 90% of the population) the patrilineal family system was quite uncommon, and women held a stronger position in the household as they shared the workload with the men (Auestad, 2005, p. 67). Nevertheless, after dismantling the feudal system and the ruling status of samurai, the new government of Meiji (1868-1912) set about to modernize Japanese society through a new vision of Japan as a family-state where the emperor became the symbolic head (and father) of the nation, by institutionalizing the *ie* ideology (Auestad, 2005, p. 67; Ruszel, 2019, p. 24). The Meiji family-state ideology would penetrate every facet of society, including family, education, commerce, the military, and law enforcement (Ruszel, 2019, p. 24). The gendered and hierarchical *ie* structure was reinforced through the construction of *ryōsai kenbo* "good wife, wise mother" interpellating "women's identities within the *ie* household" (Ruszel, 2019, p. 22).

Early Japanese feminists spent a great deal of time debating these new concepts and what it meant to become a modern woman (Fincher, 2023). Through these debates the women could "negotiate their national and gendered identities and strategize in creating narratives of self-representation" (Suzuki, 2010, p. 2). For instance, in the late 1910s, numerous newspapers featured a collection of essays known as the *bosei hogo ronsō*—the Motherhood Protection Debates (Fincher, 2023; Suzuki, 2010, p. 108). The authors explored the meaning of motherhood for female identity and to which extent the state should be involved in matters of motherhood (Fincher, 2023; Suzuki, 2010, p. 108). Many of these debates took place in the *Seitō* magazine. Translated as "Bluestocking" (referring to the Blue Stockings Society of

mid-18th century England), *Seitō* was published between 1911 and 1916 by a group of five feminists who called themselves *Seitōsha*—the Japanese Bluestocking Society.

An important concept the *Seitōsha* discussed was that of love when debating around becoming a modern woman. In a time of transition where love and marriage was still seen as incompatible by Meiji intellectuals, such as writer Tōkoku Kitamura whose love marriage had failed condemning women as "creatures of emotion, and thus tend to love because they are loved, rather than love actively..." (Suzuki, 2010, p. 67), Hiratsuka Haru Raichō, one of the *Seitōsha*, took a particular interest in Swedish feminist Ellen Key's concept of love in marriage as an expression of selfhood and self-development and translated some of her influential work into Japanese (Suzuki, 2010, pp. 11; 68). This focus on the individual allowed the wife to become equal to their partner and not just a "helpmate to her husband" as Meiji educator Iwamoto Yoshiharu would have them be (Suzuki, 2010, pp. 68–69). Key emphasized that a love-based marriage should include not only the spiritual love, but also sexual love in order to achieve equality between husband and wife (Suzuki, 2010, p. 14). Although Hiratsuka initially viewed love and marriage as two separate concepts as the institution of marriage, in her view, "perpetuated male-female inequality", she came to see Key's love marriage ideology as the ideal trajectory where both individuals and society is progressing and so the *modern love ideology*, as Suzuki coins it (2010, p. 13), was created.

Taishō period (1912-1926) intellectual Kuriyagawa Hakuson argued that *modern love ideology* allowed women to escape marriage "akin to rape or prostitution" and that through love marriage women were no longer "treated as an object existing to fulfill male sexual desires and procreative needs" as, according to him, was common in the "ancient period". Although it is unclear to what extent Hiratsuka's works reached the larger public, her ideas were popularized through Kuriyagawa's works among others and soon enough *modern love ideology* became synonym with an advanced nation and society (Suzuki, 2010, pp. 68–71).

"The 1950s and 1960s were an opportunity for "good wives and wise mothers 2.0"—this time in service to the economy instead of to the state"(Fincher, 2023). Although Japan as a family-state and the *ie* ideology was officially deinstitutionalized in postwar Japan in its reformed Constitution of 1947, in a campaign called the "New Life Movement" then prime minister Hatoyama Ichirō alongside the corporate business sector, sought to "mobilize the family—and in particular housewives—to support a new 'enterprise society' where 'meeting the needs of the corporation is 'naturally' understood to be social common sense and to be congruent with meeting the needs of all society's inhabitants'" (Gordon, 1997, p. 247, as cited in Ruszel, 2019, p. 31). In collaboration with business cooperations the state would set

up programs to professionalize housewives roles in “a new vision of Japanese society and family” very much alike the Meiji ideology “good wife, wise mother” (Ruszel, 2019, p. 31). The wives primary role would be to stay at home, taking on the responsibilities of the household, procreation and childrearing, while their husbands assumed the role of salarymen in the workforce. Together as a family unit, they would play a pivotal role in powering Japan's economy. The *modern love ideology* lingered on, and up until present day *ren’ai kekkon* (a love marriage) is still used to differentiate itself from the so-called *miai* (arranged marriage) (Suzuki, 2010, p. 65).

3.2 Scientists and lawmakers as producers of reproductive discourse

For clarification, insemination involves injecting selected sperm cells into the uterine cavity of the patient using a special catheter. The patient receives hormone stimulation prior to the treatment to increase the probability of becoming pregnant. IUI is insemination using a partner’s sperm whereas AID is insemination with donor sperm. Donors undergo detailed screening tests for the potential risk of genetic, infectious, or mental diseases in addition to a genetic analysis test. Insemination is the least burdening method of assisted reproduction for a woman. ART is the general definition of any fertility-related treatments in which eggs, embryos or sperm are manipulated (Kallen, 2021).

Up until now, the first and only law in Japan concerning ART enacted in December 2020 stipulates that legally married couples, in other words heterosexual couples, who had children through donated gametes (eggs and/or sperm) are recognized as legal parents. I come back to the course of events prior to its enactment a little further down. First, I look at the state of AID in Japan.

According to the Japan Times (Osaki, 2022) “sperm donation has existed in the legal gray zone in Japan for many decades, with no law explicitly prohibiting it, but no framework to govern it either”. It is the guidelines of the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology (henceforth JSOG) that form the baseline for the institutions that provide sperm donation and/or AID, limiting the process to infertile heterosexual married couples. These guidelines are non-binding but already are a heavy burden for the small number of hospitals and doctors who go around them and facilitate for queer and single women. As the only commercial

sperm bank in Japan (established in 2021) does not cater to single adults or queer couples, domestic doctors who are willing to take the risk, can assist the singles and queer with sperm procured from overseas banks. However, this often involves expensive travel or shipping costs.

Another way for the single and queer to acquire sperm is through the underground market for sperm donation in Japan, where success stories coexist with disturbing anecdotes of men seeking to exchange sperm for sexual favors (Fincher, 2023). Aside from ethical concerns, seeking sperm donation outside of a medical facility poses health risks, including the spread of bacteria or sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, the absence of legal protection leaves a possibility of donors later claiming parental rights to children conceived through their assistance.

New legislation presented at the end of 2022[2] supporting the JSOG's self-imposed regulations "would only authorize the process for legally married couples, mostly those affected by male infertility" (Osaki, 2022) putting an end to help received in medical facilities, leaving only the black market as an option for those who do not fit the category "legally married couples".

Scholars such as family law professor emeritus Shuhei Ninomiya oppose the legislation stating that "The desire to have children is a lifestyle choice, and it is unacceptable to discriminate based on gender identity or sexual orientation" (Kyodo News, 2023). In fact, user surveys from 2021 and 2022 from Cryos International, the world's largest sperm bank, showed that 52 percent of the respondents in Japan were single and 13 percent in same-sex relationships. The remaining 35 percent were in heteronormative marriages. Furthermore, consultation data from the company suggest that the 'single category' includes asexuals and unpartnered lesbians, and that sexual minorities account for between 30 and 40 percent of all clients (Kyodo News, 2023).

Nevertheless, public discourse around the legislation centers not around the discrimination of gender identity or sexual orientation, but rather focuses on children's rights, the consensus being that the bill has been drafted in the best interest of the child. Kozo Akino, a lawmaker involved in drafting the bill in fact says that "Assisted reproductive technology

[2] The bill has as of 2023 yet to be enacted. The nonpartisan parliamentary group deliberating the legislation is, amongst other issues, deliberating the right of children born through fertility treatment to know their biological (genetical) parents. If the bill is enacted this would mean a decline in sperm donors. Keio University Hospital is already seeing a drastic decline of sperm donors following an internal policy shift in 2017 cautioning donors that their identity could be revealed if children conceived from their sperm file legal suits (Osaki, 2022). Kawakami dives into this discussion in *Natsu Monogatari*, however, I will not go further into this topic due to the limitations of this thesis.

should not be pursued at the expense of the well-being of children" adding that children's rights are most easily protected by "legally married parents with joint custody" (Osaki, 2022).

As stated above, the first and only law in Japan concerning ART stipulates that legally married couples, in other words heteronormative couples, who had children through donated gametes (eggs and/or sperm) are recognized as legal parents. Just like with the 2022 AID-bill, we will see that public discourse around the ART bill before it was enacted also revolved around the best interest of the child even if the content of the bill did not include such topics.

The specific ART law does not consider a way to guarantee the children's right to know one's origins, nor information management of the gametes donors although the outline of the bill suggested otherwise upon its submission. This despite in its overview, the bill clearly said to be "designed for children born through ART using sperm or egg donated by third parties" according to Professor of Sociology at Meiji Gakuin University Azumi Tsuge (Tsuge & Santos, 2021).

Tsuge functioned as a lobbying actor questioning the content of the bill before it was passed and questioned if the bill "really is for the children?" She argued that if so, a system should be established to allow children who were given birth through the ART with donated gametes to know the truth. Furthermore, children should also be allowed to know who donated sperm or eggs if they wished to know. In other words, the right of children to know their origins should be guaranteed.

An initial ART bill drafted in 2003 stated that the government should examine a way to guarantee these rights (the right of children to know their origins) in addition to information management of gametes donors. The 2003 draft was cancelled, however, as further examination regarding how and what information should be available for children ought to be done. On questions on why it was cancelled "Ms. A" from the Lower House answered among other reasons[3] that "if the right for children born through ART to know the identity of their donors is recognized (as the bill specified) it is predicted that the number of donors will decline. And I do not understand how important such a right of children would be" (Ms. A, 2005, as cited in Tsuge & Santos, 2021).

In the 2020 bill that was enacted "the right to know was only added as a part to be

[3] Three main reasons were stated as subjects for further discussion before the bill could be passed. According to Ms. A., 1. Surrogacy should not be banned but permitted. 2. Sperm and egg donations from siblings should be permitted. 3. How "children's right to know their donors" would affect the number of donors.

rebutted in the future" explained Tsuge and thus concluded that "with this the bill should not be entitled to be called a bill for children" (Tsuge & Santos, 2021).

To summarize, the initial 2003 bill on ART brought forward the importance of guaranteeing the right of children to know their origins but was cancelled. The revised 2020 bill on ART was passed and became the first law on ART but does not consider a way to guarantee the children's right to know one's origins, and only stipulates that legally married couples who had children through donated gametes are recognized as legal parents, leaving singles and queer parents exposed as donors can "seek legal guardianship of their offspring, despite having agreed to simply donate their sperm" (Montgomery, 2021). Finally, the 2022 bill on AID presented as drafted in the best interest of the child, would only permit AID for legally married couples, denying singles and queer couples any legal protections in assisted pregnancy. Given the starting point in the law from 2020, and the 2022 AID bill there are several unanswered questions that come to the surface:
The "best interests of the children" is important, but does it have to come at the expense of other considerations? Could the technology not include singles and queer couples? Furthermore, what is meant by "the best interests of the children"? These are questions the selected texts attempt to answer.

Recent research supports the argument that medical professionals and lawmakers promote ART as a technology reserved to heterosexual married couples in the child's best interest. In her ethnographic research from 2008 to 2018 on "Intimate Kinships in Japanese Foster and Adoptive Care" Kathryn E. Goldfarb found that Japanese "often claim that "blood ties" are central to Japanese kinship" (2018, p. 182). She argues that public discourses on ART in Japan contribute to this mindset by standardizing the possibility of having a biologically related child and thus reinforcing the idea of *kazoku* as a biologically related unit.

In conclusion through rhetoric on the child's well-being, medical professionals and lawmakers deliberately promote ART as a technology reserved to heterosexual married couples denying singles and queer couples to form (legally or not, as it becomes frowned upon) alternative families outside of the heteronormative standard, and thus reinforce the idea of *kazoku* as a heteronormative and biologically related unit.

3.3 The Authors of the selected works

3.3.1 Shifting Landscapes in Japan (1970s-2000s)

Kawakami and Murata are part of a generation of queer and female authors [4], born in the late 1970s, addressing the theme of gender roles and social conformity in their fictions. To comprehend the narratives woven by these authors, it is crucial to consider the dynamics in Japan during the pivotal decades spanning the 1970s to the 2000s.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of significant social change in Japan, with the post-war economic boom giving way to a growing consumer culture. This era saw the emergence of new values centered around economic prosperity, material success and technological advancements. However, amidst this prosperity, traditional societal expectations and gender roles remained deeply ingrained. As a reaction, the women's liberation movement in Japan, known as *ũman ribu* focusing on women's roles and autonomy over their own bodies, began to gain momentum. Especially the “liberation from their sex" (*sei no kaihō*) was a focus point (Shigematsu, 2014, p. 174). Although women began challenging traditional gender roles, the so-called “Bubble years” of the 1980s emphasized and promoted loyalty to the company and gendered division of labor — salarymen and housewives carrying on as the norm (Suter, 2023).

The end of Japan’s post WWII-economic boom by the late 1980s-early 1990s also saw an increased questioning of traditional social roles and norms, echoing themes found in Murata and Kawakami’s works. As a result of the economic crisis, eventually known as the “lost decade”, companies were forced to end the practice of lifelong company employment and its benefits (Suter, 2023). Consequently, the 1990s created a split between the older and younger generation, with the latter increasingly drawn to individualism. Fertility rates saw a drastic decline and institutional campaigns against depopulation and aging society (*kōreika*) focused exclusively on women (Suter, 2023). Finance minister Hashimoto Ryutaro at the time even made a public statement that women should prioritize having children over their education (Alzate, 2020, p. 539). With this rhetoric women were the only culprits in the decline; however, fertility decline is proven to be caused by numerous factors including male

[4] Naocola Yamazaki and Yukiko Motoya to mention some.

infertility due to decreased sperm quality caused by environmental toxins. In fact, male infertility makes up half of infertility results (Tanaka et al., 2018).

The turn of the millennium marked a historic low of 1.26 births per woman in 2005, and has since remained remarkably low, notably below the replacement threshold of 2.1 births per woman (Fincher, 2023). This phenomenon aligns with trends in developed, late-stage capitalist economies, where low birth rates are prevalent (Fincher, 2023). However, Japan's challenge is exacerbated by historical resistance to immigration, resulting in a population decline that surpasses that of nearly any other country (Fincher, 2023). With the ongoing declining fertility rate discussions around gender equality gained momentum. On one side women who chose not to get married and pregnant and embrace the roles of wives and motherhood were labeled as “Parasite singles” (Suter, 2023). They were seen as “selfish and materialistic.” On the other side, increased employment opportunities enabled women to seek alternative ways of living outside of the heteronormative marital unit.

In essence, both authors grew up navigating the complexities of societal expectations during transformative decades for Japan, laying the groundwork for the tensions explored in their works.

3.3.2 Kawakami and Murata

In recent years, female Japanese authors of fiction, of which Kawakami and Murata have emerged as prominent figures, have witnessed a surge in popularity and recognition, both in Japan and internationally. Especially in the last fifteen years there has been a rise in Japanese female authors in the sense that they are more published, more read, and more translated. More and more female writers, including Kawakami and Murata, have won the Akutagawa prize (one of Japan’s most sought-after prizes for literature). David McNeill (2020a) makes a point that “women make up half of the last 34 winners of the Akutagawa, and nearly half of the winners of the Naoki Prize”.

To date Kawakami has published ten books including novels, novellas and poetry collection and has received seven prestigious literary awards in Japan since her debut in 2007. In 2008, she received the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for “Chichi to Ran” (her original novella *Breasts and Eggs* that she later rewrote and included in the 2020 English translated novel also

called *Breasts and Eggs*). Most recently, Kawakami received the 2019 Mainichi Publication Culture Award for *Natsu Monogatari* (*Summer stories*—translated as *Breasts and Eggs*) highlighting her consistent contribution to the world of literature. Her translated novel *Heaven* (2021, originally published as *Hevun* in 2009) was shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize.

Murata has published twelve novels and novellas and has gained recognition through literary prizes eight times (nominated in eight and won five of them) since her debut in 2003. In 2003, she made her breakthrough by winning the Gunzo Prize for New Writers for her novel *Jyunyū* (*Breastfeeding*). But it was first in 2016 that her name made it in mass media when winning the highly esteemed Akutagawa Prize for *Konbini Ningen* (*Convenience Store Human*) that Kawakami had a decade earlier. By the end of 2023, the novel has sold more than 1.6 million copies in Japan alone[5] (文春文庫編集部, personal communication, November 26, 2023).

The two authors have not only gained popularity within Japan but have also received international acclaim for their works. As mentioned above, Kawakami's Heaven (2021) was shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize, and her translated novel Breasts and Eggs (2020) was a "New York Times Notable Book of the Year" and one of TIME's Best 10 Books of 2020 (*Mieko Kawakami | The Booker Prizes*, n.d.). Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages (川上未映子, n.d.) bringing her work to the attention of a global audience. Likewise, some of Murata's works have also been translated into more than thirty languages (Page, 2019) and the author has been touring for the past years many international literature festivals including the International Literature Festival in Berlin and the Louisiana Literature festival in Denmark, expanding her readership.

While Kawakami and Murata have gained widespread acclaim for their authorship, they have also faced criticism. Negative critiques particularly regarding the explicit descriptions in

[5] I couldn't find any updated sales figures for either author past 2019 and therefore contacted (some of) their national and international publishers (Bungeishunjū Ltd, Kawade Shobō Shinsha Ltd, Granta Books, Europa Editions and Grove Atlantic) in October and November 2023. Bungeishunjū Ltd gave following numbers: *Konbini Ningen* approximately 1,654,000 copies, "Chichi to Ran" approximately 290,000 copies, *Natsu Monogatari* approximately 172,000 copies. Kawade Shobō Shinsha Ltd answered that they had sold 72 000 copies of *Seimeishiki* (株式会社河出書房新社, personal communication, November 16, 2023). This might indicate that the themes in the short story collection (cannibalism and human recycling to mention some) can be difficult to stomach compared to the more light read *Konbini Ningen*. I have yet to hear back from the other publishers.

Murata's novels have sparked debate. Murata is known for her consistent use of grotesque and at times disgusting depictions and language, making the reader shaken and engaged. In an interview with the Financial Times (Lewis, 2018), Murata revealed that her parents refrain from reading her books due to discomfort with "all the sexual descriptions in there". Additionally, her brother expressed difficulty recommending the books to his friends, highlighting the controversial nature of the themes she explores. Somehow Murata never finds the perfect solution in her quest to free her characters from the cultural hegemony, and as we will see in the chapter analyzing two of her short stories, her characters often end up in imperfect alternative societies. In a novel she is currently working on, Murata explains in an interview (Ha, 2022) that she tried to delegate the reproductive and birthing-part to other creatures hoping "it would provide a great relief to women," but, laughing at her conceitedness, realized that as she wrote "it just got more and more hellish" and that she "didn't solve anything."

As for Kawakami, her novella "Chichi to Ran" that takes on the complexities of womanhood was criticized by traditionalists. Ishihara Shintaro, Tokyo's then-governor (governor of Tokyo from 1999 to 2012) and a former novelist, deemed the work "egocentric, self-absorbed" and "unpleasant and intolerable." (Fincher, 2023; McNeill, 2020b). Translator and theatre director Roger Pulvers branded the novella as "chick-lit" stating the author's popularity was "part of the phenomenon of confessional fiction [...] where the writer is very frank about sex and personal, especially family relationships" (Fincher, 2023). Despite such negative critiques, the novella in question has sold more than 290,000 copies (文春文庫編集部, personal communication, November 26, 2023) sparking vital conversations about women's roles and choices in Japan.

Kawakami and Murata have both won praise for their exploration of thought-provoking themes that appeal to readers globally. The authors' characters navigate domestic arrangements that distort the image of marriage, reproduction, and family. While gender roles are a leading theme in both author's works, it is also noteworthy that they explore a range of other themes. Kawakami addresses issues such as bullying, coming of age and precarity while Murata challenges norms through taboos like incest, sexual relationships with fictious beings, murder and cannibalism. Nevertheless, the themes the authors address often come back to the struggles of being a woman or queer person. In other words, their works often

dive into intersectional feminist themes[6], exploring the intersections of gender with factors like class, age, technology, and sexual orientation. This nuanced approach to feminism contributes to a richer understanding of women's experiences. As Lewis (2018) points out "Murata's writing is not overtly feminist, but her laser-targeting of the Japanese female condition makes her one of the most powerful de facto critics of Japan's contemporary gender imbalances."

Scholars have engaged in extensive analyses of Murata's and Kawakami's works, offering diverse perspectives on the way one can interpret the authors' works. As this thesis examines how non-normative perspectives on family life in contemporary feminist fictions challenge hegemonic understandings of the family system *kazoku*, I limit this section to a few of the scholars going into these topics. Nevertheless it is worthwhile mentioning that the scholarly discourses on Kawakami and Murata include precariousness and Post-Fordist capitalism (Jaseel & Gaur, 2022), posthumanism (Gheorghe, 2023; Specchio, 2023b), and affect and the 'feeling' of participation in the narratives (Auestad, 2016) to mention some.

In her extensive book Sexuality, Maternity, and (Re)productive Futures (2021) originating from her 2015 doctoral dissertation at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, Kazue Harada explores alternative (re)productive[7] futures that Japanese female authors have imagined. Among the authors she examines, Harada analyzes Murata's novel *Shōmetsu sekai* (Vanishing World, 2015). Here she looks at how Murata uses bioengineering technology such as IVF to create alternative kinship and how she introduces conflicting ideas about biological and non-biological parenthood. Japanese society being hegemonically dominated by government policies and medical guidelines that incorporate preference to the biological family, and childbearing through a heterosexual act, Harada offers insightful perspectives on why Murata (amongst the other women writers) needs speculative features when writing about alternative futures.

[6] American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 explaining Intersectional feminism as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other" (UN Women, 2020)

[7] Harada's coined term "(re)production" has a double meaning. *""Seisansei" can be understood as both productivity and reproductivity, hence my choice [...] for the double meaning of reproduction and (economic) production that is embedded in Sugita's key assumption: it is only heteronormative (re)productivity—having children—that contributes to society.* " (Harada, 2021, p. 1)

On the same novel, Anna Specchio argues in her 2020 article “No sex and the paradise city: A critical reading of Murata Sayaka’s *Shōmetsu sekai* (2015)” that the plot “represents innovation and a step ahead from the gendered and conservative society of today,” (2020, p. 391) and that the novel can be considered “a techno-feminist or LGBTQ+ or genderqueer utopia since the use of technology in this work aims to free women from the Japanese current concept of womanhood as bound to compulsory motherhood [...]” (2020, p. 391). Specchio has also researched other works of Murata arguing for instance that one can consider the protagonist of *Konbini Ningen* as “a sort of present-day *yamanba*,” (Specchio, 2023a, p. 219) a literary device used to liberate characters from “feminine norms” and to create a “possibility outside of and surpassing the gender system” (Mizuta, 2002, as cited in Specchio, 2023a, p. 219). Furthermore, Specchio elaborates on the author’s use of speculative features such as cannibalism as being “not only used as a literary trope to rethink women, but also human beings in general, in a vision that is no longer anthropocentric” (2023b).

Within the scope of Kawakami's scholarships, Alzate uses a feminist perspective in her 2020 article “Embodiment and Its Violence in Kawakami Mieko’s “Chichi to Ran”: Menstruation, Beauty Ideals, and Mothering” to analyze how Kawakami problematizes agency in relation to cultural and economic mechanisms in “Chichi to Ran” that impose violence on the female body and maintain gender norms in a male-dominated society. She uses excerpts involving menstruation, reproduction, as well as mothering to underline her argument (Alzate, 2020). In a more recent research, Alzate and Yoshio (2022) look at how *Natsu Monogatari* (2019) react to political constraints and governmental discourses while maintaining a feminist drive to restore reproductive justice in their book chapter “Reimagining the Past, Present, and the Future of Reproductive Bodies in Contemporary Japanese Women’s Fiction: Mieko Kawakami’s Breasts and Eggs and Sayaka Murata’s Vanishing World”.

Kawakami and Murata’s protagonists are often portrayed as social outsiders. They do not fit into the expected roles assigned by society, leading to a sense of isolation or alienation. The authors share a common ground in their exploration of the Japanese female condition; however, they approach this theme from distinct perspectives.

Murata's protagonists often navigate the constraints of societal norms with a quiet defiance, but often end up rebelling against social norms in the most unusual ways. In

contrast, Kawakami's characters, more often observe and reflect about the current state of being, not necessarily rebelling, but in their own way finding ways to obtain what they seek.

Moreover, Murata's prose is characterized by a minimalist and straightforward style representative of her stance on controversial topics— she dives right into them and allows readers to engage directly with the narrative. Her readers, however, have also expressed they feel her deliberate "flattened prose" comes off as robotic, making the dialogues between her characters artificial (Wan, 2021). On the other hand, Kawakami's writing style is often more expansive, allowing for a deeper exploration of the emotional landscapes of her characters. As Reiko Abe Auestad (2016, p. 533) points out, the protagonist of *Natsu Monogatari*, Natsu, "writes as if she is speaking to us, in long, run-on sentences, incorporating dialogues and inner monologues into her narration." Furthermore, Kawakami has been recognized for her use of the Osaka-dialect[8] in her texts, resulting in "feminism and language collid[ing] in a way that feels deliciously irreverent[9]" (Thien, 2020).

Finally, although many of the two writer's protagonists are women in their thirties and forties, the settings in which these characters navigate, diverge. Murata's characters often live in near future or parallel worlds, where other norms, often exaggerated, are the new standard. By presenting these improbable scenarios, the Murata highlights the absurdity of the standards we blindly adhere to (Ha, 2022). Kawakami's characters, on the other hand, often live in contemporary Japan and develop an obsession towards a subject—breasts, reproduction, and money to mention some. This allows the reader to follow the character's train of thoughts over time.

In conclusion, Kawakami and Murata have emerged as influential voices in contemporary literature, offering unique perspectives on gender dynamics in Japan. According to Tamura Aya, a culture critic with Kyodo News Agency, what makes the two authors unusual is that they "write about reproduction, periods, birth and sex in such explicit detail," adding that it "was shocking for some" (Tamura, as cited in McNeill, 2020a, p. 1). Their critical reception both within and outside Japan, coupled with scholarly analyses, demonstrates the literary

[8] See Alzate's recommendation for further exploration of the significance of Kawakami's use of Osaka dialect. (Alzate, 2020, p. 543, Footnote 21)

[9] Critics have emerged regarding the omission of the Osaka dialect in the English translation of *Natsu Monogatari*, *Breasts and Eggs*, stating that "Kawakami's idiosyncratic use of language is lost on Anglophone readers"(*Review of [Breasts and Eggs] BREASTS AND EGGS | Kirkus Reviews*, 2020) and that although "Kawakami's feminism is vivid, […] the language occasionally feels placid" (Thien, 2020). Other translators have taken on the challenge of translating the Osaka dialect. Translator Magne Tørring used Bergen dialect from the second-largest city of Norway in the Norwegian version *Natsus Somre* resulting in him winning the Bastian Prize awarded by the Norwegian Association of Literary Translators (Ann Helen, 2023).

significance of their works. While sharing common ground in their thematic focus, the authors exhibit distinct approaches, reflecting the multiple ways to approach discourse around the female body. In the next chapter I will discuss two stories from Murata's short story collection *Seimeishiki* (2019).

4 Female Friendship Companionship in Murata's works

In this chapter I will first give a summary of the plot of "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" and "Futari Kazoku", and then present my take on how these stories are related to each other and depict alternative lives the protagonist and her friend could have lived. In doing so, I argue that "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" represents contemporary Japan and that "Futari Kazoku" represents an alternative Japan. As we will see, rather than solutions, both stories offer imperfect alternatives that I will elaborate on in the discussion part of the chapter. There, I show that through these two short stories, I argue that the author Murata is presenting her view that female friendship companionship provides an alternative form of *kazoku* and that this form of family can be seen as freeing women—although imperfectly—from the contemporary normative marital family unit. I will start by describing the relationship between Yoshiko and Kikue, and show that through it, the novella suggests that platonic friendship can be seen as more valuable and lasting than heterosexual love when making a *kazoku*. Next, I will talk about how marriage can be sexless, and still reproductive by looking at Yoshiko's case, and likewise sexual yet non-reproductive by looking at Kikue's case. Through these examples I examine how the characters deconstruct sex in a marriage. Third, I discuss the circumstances of Mizuho through her upbringing and show how the novella is answering claims made by lawmakers as to the negative effects of children born through artificial insemination raised by non-normative families. Lastly, I argue that although both short stories include families with children, they envision *kazoku* as a two persons' matter and that Yoshiko and Kikue's companionship should be considered as the strongest and most permanent form of *kazoku*. By analyzing these four aspects of the two stories, we gain an understanding of Murata's views on the normative marital family unit.

4.1 Summary of "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" and "Futari Kazoku"

The first story (as chronologically presented in the short story collection), “Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke” is told from the perspective of Yoshiko, an older woman in her seventies. Yoshiko is a virgin widow with two children conceived through artificial insemination who enjoys living by herself after her children moved out and her husband died a few years ago. We learn that other than being a virgin, although having lived a perfectly “normal life” (marrying, having children[10]), “everyone[11]” nosily inquired about her sex life and sexual orientation when learning she still was a virgin. Yoshiko eventually stopped telling others and noticed they would assume she was an “ordinary person” (Murata, 2019, p. 110) having reproduced in the conventional way. One evening she gets a phone call from her friend Kikue, who asks Yoshiko if she can come over and make something out of the tray of peaches she was sent by her sister as a gift. Kikue and Yoshiko had met through the local community center and quickly gotten along. Kikue, also in her seventies, was a childless “*nymphomaniac*” enjoying her single life. When Yoshiko had confessed to Kikue that she was a virgin, Kikue did not make a fuss about it. Yoshiko meets Kikue in the residential area, and Kikue takes out some sweet warabimochi dumplings out of a convenience store bag. Kikue compares the dumplings to a boy’s tongue (Kikue dates younger men). Yoshiko says that in that case she does not want one, but eventually bites into one, and they both laugh.

In “Futari Kazoku” the story is also told from the perspective of a woman named Yoshiko, here also in her seventies, visiting her family member Kikue at the hospital. We learn that Kikue has cancer. A younger patient in her fifties sharing the same room as Kikue is surprised that Yoshiko is already back to see Kikue. She assumes Yoshiko is Kikue’s sister and praises their long-lasting sisterhood. Yoshiko responds that they are not sisters, but that they have lived together for around forty years now and are family. The woman is confused, but does not ask any further questions, and Yoshiko is not bothered to explain either. During their high school years Yoshiko and Kikue, like many of their other friends, had promised to live together for life if they had not married by the age of thirty. Yoshiko being too reserved and Kikue too promiscuous, it was unlikely they would ever find a marriage partner. Their thirtieth birthday comes along, and the two single women keep their promise and move in together. Soon after, Yoshiko gives birth to their first daughter through sperm donation, then their second daughter the year after, and a few years later Kikue births their third daughter

[10] “*Shojoda to iu ta wa, goku heibon ni katei o kizuki, oite kita.”* (Murata, 2019, p. 110)
[11] “*Mina, nehorihahori Yoshiko no shikō ya sei seikatsu o kikou to shita.”* (Murata, 2019, p. 110)

also through the same reproductive method. Together they live in an intimate, yet non-romantic and non-sexual relationship, raising their three daughters equally as sisters. Although having moments of doubt because of the constant judgment of their surroundings, the family of five live happily with their arrangement. While Yoshiko does not take interest in any sexual relationships, Kikue enjoys many lovers over the years. Her last lover had disappeared, however, upon hearing the news about the cancer. And now that all three girls have grown up and moved out of the home it is just the two of them again. While at the hospital the two women talk about what their life would have been like if they had not formed a family together and conclude that they probably would have been the same, being friends and getting by in their own way. Yoshiko wonders what will happen to her if Kikue dies. Although not legally married, Yoshiko's friendship with Kikue is a marriage of sorts, the only marriage Yoshiko has ever known. Yoshiko decides that if Kikue dies, she will be the chief mourner above all at her funeral.

4.1.1 Stylistic and thematic comparison

Comparing the writing style in “Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke” and “Futari Kazoku”, we see similarities through the same use of third-person limited narration, unusual tenderness and straightforwardness in the choice of language, and the depiction of one main scene in the narrative present. Thematically, Yoshiko’s internal conflict with her external environment and Kikue’s boldness and bluntness are comparable, as well as the course of events starting with a retrospect of Yoshiko’s lived live(s) up until now, and then a focus shift to the character’s friendship in the narrative present.

Most of the short stories in *Seimeishiki* are written from the first-person point of view, giving the reader intimate access to the main characters’ thoughts, feelings and understanding of their society’s customs. Here, however, both stories are written in third-person limited narration, still granting the reader access to Yoshiko’s thoughts and feelings, and her viewpoint on her world(s). This choice of narration might stimulate the characters’ detachment from themselves in retrospective to their long-lived lives. In other words, the characters take an external or objective standpoint when reflecting on their past. Yoshiko is

contemplating from outside her longed lived life and is no longer "bothered to explain[12]" (Murata, 2019, p. 110, p. 117) her family situation to outsiders.

When it comes to language style, the language is familiar, straightforward, and easy to follow. This is common in Murata's writings and in that way the two selected stories do not stand out from the rest of the collection. Nevertheless, for those familiar with Murata's works, they often include grotesque and at times disgusting depictions and language, making the reader shaken and engaged. In this regard "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" and "Futari Kazoku" stand out from the rest of the collection as, although being bold, neither story is disgusting nor grotesque. On the contrary, reading audience (Alia, 2023; Hank, 2022; Jason, 2023; Pink, 2022) have branded the two stories as "sweet and nice" and "unusually tender" to mention some. One reviewer wrote that the "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" was a "a sweet little story" and that she "didn't expect anything like this from her [Murata]." (Pink, 2022).

Structurally, both stories provide one main scene in the narrative present, one in a residential area outside of a convenience store[13], the other in a hospital room. Both settings are two sterile environments with their respective robotic sounds, blinding lights, and clean furniture—not a place one would usually want to stay in for a long time. The sterile cleanliness of the scenes can be seen as an allegory of the sterile normalcy and normativity found in the characters' worlds.

In comparison with the other stories in the collection, "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" and "Futari Kazoku" show similarities in characters personalities, inner monologues and dialogues, and settings and course of events.

Yoshiko's internal conflict with her environment is paramount to both stories. Her inner monologues often reveal the unspoken in dialogues with others. She finds people's response to her family situation in both stories "cruel[14]" ("Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke") and she "could hit them[15]" ("Futari Kazoku") for their reactions but does not verbalize it. Both

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[12] *"Kenki ga sashita Yoshiko wa, sono koto o himitsu ni suru yō ni natta."* (Murata, 2019, p.110) and "*Sestumei suru no ga mendō ni natteiru Yoshiko […]*" (Murata, 2019, p. 117)

[13] In the main scene both characters are walking in the dark alley in the residential area, but the reader assumes they have met outside a convenience store or just left the convenience store as the narrative leading up to the scene talks about a convenience store and then in the main scene both women are eating "*nicely chilled*" dumplings from a convenience store nearby. The reader therefore is immerged in a "convenience store-setting".

[14] "*Sōiu yokan no han'nō o Yoshiko wa tanjun de, zankoku de, gōmanda to omotta*." (Murata, 2019, p. 110)

[15] "*Omaera date wakai koro 'toshi tottemo otagai aite ga mitsukaranakattara issho ni kurasō ne!' to itte itadaro, to naguritaku natta."* (Murata, 2019, p. 120)

stories include Yoshiko's reflections on the past. Looking back at her earlier self, Yoshiko's private thoughts would often add tension to the story. In the narrative present, however, Yoshiko seems more at peace with her situation.

In contrast to Yoshiko, Kikue is not afraid to speak her mind in both narratives and does not mind sharing aloud her opinion on her way of living. The common ground of the characters in both narratives is that they live outside of social norms. In the first story Kikue is a childless nymphomaniac enjoying her single life and Yoshiko is a virgin widow with children conceived through artificial insemination enjoying living alone after her children moved out. In the second story Kikue, still a nymphomaniac, now lives with Yoshiko, still a virgin, both having had children conceived through artificial insemination and forming an unconventional family. Another common denominator, as we have seen, is that the women are asked to account for their choices not only towards institutions or even strangers, but also towards family and friends. Let us not forget the similarity in friendship and age, the two women are good friends in their seventies in both narratives.

The course of events is quite similar, a lookback at Yoshiko's lived live(s) up until now, and then a focus shift to the character's friendship in the narrative present. The ending of "Futari Kazoku" which follows "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" in the collection suggests a circular movement back to "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke". Yoshiko wonders what her and Kikue's life would have been like if they had not lived together. Kikue answers that they probably would have been the same, being friends and getting by in their own way (Murata, 2019, p. 124).

In sum, the two selected short stories share significant similarities in writing style and content.

4.1.2 Contemporary and alternative Japan

By looking at the accessibility of AID in both stories, the wish versus duty to have children, and the relationship between Yoshiko and her husband, "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" can be seen as representing contemporary Japan and "Futari Kazoku" an alternative society.

As we have seen, "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" depicts Yoshiko in a seemingly heterosexual normative marriage and Kikue as a single and childless woman. Both situations

are plausible in today's Japan. As a plot twist, Yoshiko is a virgin and has her children conceived through artificial insemination. Current proposed AID legislation would legally limit the process to infertile heterosexual married couples, and already many institutions are following these guidelines. Although the reader does not know whether Yoshiko or her husband had infertility issues, Yoshiko's sexlessness is put forward as the reason for choosing AID. Nevertheless, fulfilling the criteria of being in a heterosexual marriage it is reasonable to think that Yoshiko was able to obtain AID through recognized institutions. Kikue on the other hand is single and childless and does not seem to have wanted children. I will elaborate on this later in the "Peach boy Momotarō"-section. In "Futari Kazoku" Kikue and Yoshiko are companions in a non-romantic and non-sexual way, raising their three daughters, also conceived through AID. The reader is not informed of the details surrounding the method of conception, but equally not informed of any complications or struggles to access this form of reproductive method and it is therefore credible that AID is accessible to queer couples in this story's society and in such way represents an alternative Japan.

Furthermore, real-life examples of queer couples using AID show that although obtaining certificates recognizing their same-sex relationship enabling them to designate their partners as life insurance beneficiaries, the certificates have no real significance and is in no way an acknowledgment of their family status. "My partner can't be let into my hospital room. She can't pick up our kids from the nursery. Things that a normal family can do, we can't; we're just not seen as a family" (Misa, 2021, as cited in Montgomery, 2021). Yoshiko does not mention any restrictions regarding being let in the hospital room or picking up the kids from school. This comes to support my argument that "Futari Kazoku" is set in an alternative Japan.

Yoshiko has children in both stories, but whereas her children are very present in Yoshiko's thoughts and feelings in "Futari Kazoku", Yoshiko does not mention them in "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" other than that she enjoys living by herself after them moving out and her husband dying. The absence of the children in the first story leaves it open to interpretation; did Yoshiko want children, or did she have them out of duty towards the heteronormative family institution[16]? Similarly, the relationship between Yoshiko and her husband, or rather the absence of it, might insinuate an obligation to the normative marital unit. These ambiguities come to support the presumption that "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" is

[16] See my notes on the ryōsai kenbo reform in the context, chapter 3.

set in contemporary Japan where the social pressure to conform is still very present.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Platonic friendship over heterosexual love

The main relationship in the two short stories is that of Yoshiko and Kikue. In the first piece Yoshiko and Kikue develop a friendship in the later part of their life. Their friendship is intimate, and they can talk to each other about anything without fear of judgment. Kikue boasts about her relationship with younger men to Yoshiko who does not mind. Likewise, Kikue's non-judgmental response[17] to Yoshiko upon learning that she was a virgin says something about the way the women approach others unconventional ways of living. Their differences form their common ground in that they both accept each other's uniqueness. Through casual speech style and teasing comments, the reader gets a feeling that their friendship has grown over time, allowing them to make fun of each other for their atypical choices. "'Don't you have a date tonight' Yoshiko asked teasingly. 'I only go on dates when it's raining. Nights as pleasant as this feel too wholesome for kissing on the streets.' Kikue replied primly." (Murata & Takemori, 2022, p. 47). In other words, nights like these are for more important matters, such as friendships.

In the second piece the two friends have lived together for about 40 years rearing their children from sperm donation and constitute an unconventional family. Their friendship started in high school when they promised each other that they would move in together if by the age of thirty they had not settled down. Other classmates had at the time made the same promise, but Yoshiko and Kikue were the only ones going through with it[18]. When Yoshiko was worried about their life choices, Kikue would reassure her. When Kikue was feeling down Yoshiko would encourage her. Yoshiko and Kikue consider themselves as *kazoku*. The sentence *kazoku nan desu* (we are family) or variations of it is repeated steadily throughout the short story. By the end of the novel the reader is convinced Yoshiko and Kikue are a family.

[17] "*Kikue wa, Yoshikoko ga shojoda to uchiaketa toki mo, 'ara sō' to unazuita dakedatta*." (Murata, 2019, p.112)
[18] Promises one makes as a child or adolescent that lose their value upon the coming of age because one has to conform to social norms, is a recurring topic in Murata's works.

Noticeable is that the men in the women's lives are not present. In the first piece Yoshiko's relationship to her late husband is barely mentioned and she seems happier now that she is one her own, and Kikue's relationships with the younger men seem to be trivial and short-lived rather than meaningful and connecting. In the second, Kikue continues to enjoy many lovers over the years, but her last lover had disappeared, however, upon hearing the news about the cancer.

It seems that the men in the women's lives both fluctuate and vanish from sight when support is needed, the two women, however, are there for each other regardless of time (Yoshiko meets Kikue late at night in "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke") or cause (Kikue has cancer in the second I Harada points out that "Female–female or male–male friend companionships are […] based on compatibility and emotional support" (2021, p. 121) something Murata might suggest the men in Yoshiko and Kikue's lives are lacking[19]. On the same note, in her thesis Thea Hammarqvist (2021) writes about Adrienne Rich's concept of "lesbian continuum", an idea including a range of "women-identified experience" not only limited to women who have sexual or romantic relations with other women, but also including women who experience "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support," (Rich, 2003, p. 27 as cited in Hammarqvist, 2021, p. 36). Yoshiko and Kikue with their intimate yet non-romantic and non-sexual companionship fall into this category, and following the same line of reasoning as Hammarqvist argument in her analysis on Yoshiya Nobuko's 1919 novel *Yaneura no Nishojo*, I argue that Murata's selected short stories can be read as a "political statement that encourages women to support and rely on each other to overcome the hardships they experience in a patriarchal society" (2021, p. 36).

4.2.2 Sexless yet reproductive, sexual but not reproductive

Yoshiko is portrayed as a virgin who is not interested in sex and yet she has two biological

[19] Alison Fincher (2023) points out that this goes both ways, for instance in the novel *Ore Ore* (2010) by Tomoyuki Hoshino (translated into English in 2017 under the title *ME*) where a group of male friends state that "We don't need marital partners," as "Our mutual understanding far exceeds any that we might have with a girlfriend or wife." Furthermore, in another of Murata's novels one of her characters says that "If there is a method for having a child between men, marriage between a man and a woman will drastically decrease." (*Shōmetsu Sekai*, 2015, p.63 as cited in Harada, 2021, p. 121)

children through artificial insemination technology in each narrative. That the idea of reproduction is deeply ingrained in the act of sexual intercourse and deviating from the act would mean to deviate from the norm. The narrative in "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" demonstrates this through the negative responses of friends[20] upon learning that she conceived without having sexual intercourse with her husband. On the opposite bank, in the second narrative, Yoshiko and Kikue's companionship show that even when sexual intercourse for reproduction is not physically possible, it is still possible to conceive. As Harada points out in her analysis on *Shōmetsu sekai* (2015), among singles and childless, sexless are often made scapegoats of the falling fertility rate in society (2021, p.109). In this way "Murata's world offers an ironic critique of the rhetoric of pro-natal policies by providing a solution to low fertility through a version of (re)productive futurism with a sexless, yet still (re)productive family system" (Harada, 2021, p. 109).

As for Kikue, her promiscuous character shows that sex and marriage can coexists without being entangled. In the second narrative Kikue also has a child through AID, although being heterosexual and highly sexual. One way to read Kikue's promiscuity is through Judith Butler's notion on gender performativity[21] suggesting that the act of repeating and having sexual intercourse with men over the years is a way of performing (and repeating) her heterosexuality. And so, if we agree that Kikue is heterosexual, and we also agree that Kikue and Yoshiko are family, then it means that one is not obliged to create a family with a partner from the other sex even if being heterosexual. In other words, sexual intercourse does not need to be part of a marriage or partnership for a marriage or partnership to be regarded as such.

Put simply, marriage does not need to accommodate for sex for pleasure or for sex for reproduction. In this way the short story is deconstructing the *modern love ideology* (see 3.1) introduced in the Meiji period where the concept of love would save the wives from a marriage where they were "treated as an object existing to fulfill male sexual desires and procreative needs".

[20] "*E, nande? Datte, kodomo wa? E, jinkō jusei? Soko made shite, dōshite?*" (Murata, 2019, p.110)

[21] Gender performativity is a term first coined by Judith Butler in their 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that gender is not something one is, but something one does. People learn to behave in specific ways to fit into society. In other words, the idea of gender is an act, or performance. See Chapter two for more details.

4.2.2.1 Peach boy Momotarō

Although the section above shows how a marriage can be sexless yet reproductive, Murata does not explicitly seek[22] to create reproductive families in her narratives. By looking at Yoshiko and Kikue's reproductive and non-reproductive lives in "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" we see that Murata also criticizes the pressure to be reproductive to meet society's expectations.

Through the metaphor of the peach from the legend of Momotarō, Murata rejects the social pressure to marry and have children (through conventional ways). The link between the legend of Momotarō and "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" may seem weak at first glance, the two stories being produced in completely different eras with different objectives. Nevertheless, both address the social expectations of having a child.

Kikue asks if Yoshiko can come over to her place and "deal with" the box of peaches she was sent as a gift, as she does not know what to do with them. In addition to her verbally expressed annoyance, the passive verb form (*ukemi kei*) of the verb "to send" in this sentence[23] suggests that Kikue feels she was imposed the box of peaches. Her good friend Yoshiko, however, knows exactly what to do with them and is good at what she does (making peach compotes[24]).

The usage of food as a metaphor is a well know literary device. One famous story with food motifs is the legend of Momotarō. Momotarō "is looked upon as the Japanese fairy tale" (Antoni, 1991, p. 163) both nationally and internationally. It tells the story of a boy (Momotarō) born from a peach to a childless old couple, saving his village by defeating demons when he grows up. The folktale was popularized during the Meiji period when it was included in school textbooks, but before the inclusion changes to the story were made. In the older versions from the Edo period (1603–1867) Momotarō was born naturally to the elderly woman. The old couple ate the peach and regained their juvenility and fecundity. On the same night they had sexual intercourse and Momotarō was conceived. In the modernized version from the Meiji period, however, Momotarō is born out of the peach itself. In this way sexual

[22] As stated, is important to acknowledge that Murata and Kawakami offer variations of a livable life with diversity in their stories. This thesis, however, focuses mainly on alternative families that include offsprings and therefore variations of a livable life is a topic left for further research.
[23] "*Konya ie ni konai? Imōto kara momo ga ichi hako okurarete kite, komatteru yo"* (Murata, 2019, p. 111)
[24] "*Hora, anata wa mono o tsukuru no ga jozudeshita. Yudeta furutsu……"* (Murata, 2019, p. 111)

intercourse could be omitted from the school textbooks. “It was not the number of orally preserved variants that gave [Momotarō] its shape, but the edition in the primary school readers that became the standard version.” (Antoni, 1991, p.163)

And thus, the peach itself became the symbol of fecundity. The fruit’s resemblance to a women’s hip strengthened this representation across the country. (Mcknight & YoungEun, 2013). In comparison to fertility which is the number of offsprings born to a woman, fecundity is the physiological potential of a woman to bear children and therefore tells us something about the possibility of reproduction. Even at an old age, upon eating the peach the woman’s fecundity is restored. The peach has been interpreted as “fertility given to an old woman, who never conceived any child of her own” (Bryn, 2007, p. 52).

In other words, the “peach passage” can be interpreted as Kikue who is given the possibility of fecundity but does not take it. Kikue is not interested in having a child and establishing a family as she is expected of mainstream society. She does not wish to conform to the story’s patriarchal and heteronormative reproductive society[25]. Kikue does not take interest in the making of the peach compote which can be seen as she does not take care in the making of an offspring. Her good friend Yoshiko, however, according to Kikue herself, is quite talented at making peach compote. One way to read this comment is how Yoshiko has mastered the art or rather duty of cooking for her family through the *ryōsai kenbo* reform. Another way of interpreting this comment, which is slightly more interesting, is that Yoshiko, through the birth of two children has mastered the duty of reproduction, as expected of her in “Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke”’s society.

4.2.3 Adapting to the Non-normative Family: The case of Mizuho

Looking at Yoshiko and Kikue’s oldest daughter Mizuho’s opinion and her upbringing the novella shows that Mizuho’s well-being is not affected, or if so only positively, by the family’s non-normative family life. Through Mizuho’s character one might argue that the author Murata is answering claims made by lawmakers as to the negative effects of children born through artificial insemination and raised by non-normative families. As stated in the context chapter, new legislation on AID that is being debated these days would legally limit

the process to infertile heterosexual married couples, the general consensus being that the bill has been drafted in the best interest of the child and that "assisted reproductive technology should not be pursued at the expense of the well-being of children" (Osaki, 2022).

The normative concern for the well-being of the child translates in "Futari Kazoku". On a home visit to Yoshiko and Kikue, Mizuho's homeroom teacher is concerned about how their family arrangement affects Mizuho. Mizuho is Yoshiko and Kikue's oldest daughter and at that time in her final year of elementary school. Her two younger siblings attend the same school. The homeroom teacher seems uncomfortable (*igokochi waru-sō*) scanning the family's living room. She then asks the rhetorical question if Yoshiko is sharing a flat with Ms. Kojima (Kikue) the mother of Nana from second grade[26]. To this Yoshiko responds that Nana is hers and Kikue's youngest daughter and that they raise their daughters equally regardless of who gave birth to them[27]. Rather than asking how this arrangement is going, the teacher urges Yoshiko to tell their children that Yoshiko and Kikue are just two single mothers sharing a flat together because children will be "confused in such a complicated environment[28]."

The homeroom teacher can be seen as representing the educational institution and in a broader sense the view of society upon this family's way of living and the concern for children living under the same roof. Her choice of words says something about her prejudice about Yoshiko's family arrangement. I look at two loanwords "*shinguru mazā*" and "*rumushea*" to build my argument.

The English loanword "*shinguru mazā*" or single mother emphasizes this state of being (a single mother) as something foreign or as unconventional. Zhang explains that its Japanese counterpart "*mikon no haha*" (unmarried mother) has unfavorable societal repercussions to some communities and that loanwords such as "*shinguru mazā*" add ambiguity to the message conveyed and, therefore, can be used by "the wider communities to avoid pointing out the direct, or undisguised, meanings of the Native expressions" (Zhang, n.d., p. 19) (Zhang, 2019, p.19). By using the term "*shinguru mazā*" people interacting with

[26] "*Ano… Yamazaki-san wa Kojima-san to rūmushea nasatte irundesu yo ne. Hora, 2-nen 2-kumi no Nana-chan no okāsan to*" (Murata, 2019, p.119)
[27] "*Nana wa uchi no Sanjo desu. Dochira ga unda ka ni kakawarazu, kōhei ni sodateteimasu*" (Murata, 2019, p.119)
[28] "*…Ē to, sōiu fukuzatsuna kankyō wa, kodomo ga konran suru n janai deshou ka. to, Chan to, shingurumazā futari no rūmushea dearu koto o, kodomo-tachi ni tsutaeta hō ga ii to omou n desu. Daijōbudesu! Mizuho-san wa tottemo kashikoi ko desukara, wakatte kuremasu yo"* (Murata, 2019, p.119-120)

Yoshiko and/or Kikue choose to assume that there's a somewhat "good reason" for the two women being single mothers, for instance maybe that they had the children outside of wedlock, or that they were divorced or widowed, and thus still belonging to the criteria of heterosexual relationships. In this way they avoid being confronted with their own feelings of discomfort and judgment regarding Yoshiko and Kikue's unusual family arrangement of female friendship companionship and unconventional reproductive method (sperm donation), neither being within the heteronormative family structure. In other words, the two women remain products of heterosexual relationship discourse.

Likewise, "*rumushea*" or flat share is often seen as a temporary state of being, for instance due to financial instability (Druta & Ronald, 2021, p.1226), and usually with a *tanin*[29] (stranger). In other words, the rhetoric of two single mothers sharing a flat together would state that Yoshiko and Kikue certainly *not* are *kazoku*. However, the two women are not "just" two single mothers and do not "just" share a flat together. In fact, after having the children Yoshiko and Kikue made the intentional choice of leaving the big city life of Tokyo and bought a flat together in the suburbs of Chiba Prefecture (Murata, 2019, p. 119) a prefecture east of Tokyo known to be family friendly. Hence, their arrangement cannot be seen as a temporary state of being, quite the opposite, their actions imply permanency.

Yoshiko holding her ground, the homeroom teacher is left perplexed not knowing what to answer but concludes that "there are all kinds of families[30]" and that "Mizuho's grades are good" and so she does not pursue her request. This passage can be seen as the concern for the child being put forward masking the real intention of the teacher that is as far as it goes to restore the heteronormative family unit.

The novella opposes the idea that the best for the child is to have two heterosexual married parents by showing that Mizuho is happy with her family arrangement, that her education is not affected by it and ultimately that she grows up becoming a well-functioning citizen. Kikue says that the children are "so happy" and that "having two mothers creates a fantastic family environment[31]." The child's point of view and development in the story are key elements showing that female friend companionship can provide a good and stable

[29] "The idea of *tanin* or a stranger refers to someone outside of "blood ties" (ketsu'en)" (Harada, 2021, p. 120)
[30] *"Tan'nin kyōshi wa, mendōna seito o hikiatete shimatta, to iu kao to, kono mamade ī no ka, to iu kao to ryōhō no hyōjō o kōgo ni ukabe, `Hā……mā……, kazoku ni wa iron'na katachi ga arimasu mon ne…… Mizuho-san wa seiseki mo īdesushi……' to ocha o nigoshita"* (Murata, 2019, p.120)
[31] *"Ōkasan ga futari iru nante, saiko no kankyō janai. Kodomo-tachi wa yorokonderu wa yo"* (Murata, 2019, p.121)

family environment[32]. Yoshiko is concerned about Mizuho's' well-being, especially after the meeting with the homeroom teacher, and asks Mizuho if other people at school are saying things too. Mizuho who was 11-12 years old at the time does not seem concerned by her mother's worry and answers, "well she's an ordinary (*futsū*) person after all[33]" and that it is expected that ordinary people respond this way. Mizuho goes on asking her mother if she expects society to understand (their way of living) and adds that "they cannot carry on (living) like this if they themselves are not okay with how things are[34]." Mizuho's strength in resisting both formal (school institution) and informal (classmates) social pressure is debated in queer theories. In an interview, Judith Butler (2011) talks about the "institutional powers like psychiatric normalization" and the "informal kinds of practices like bullying which try to keep us in our gendered place". Mizuho in many ways represent the essence of Butlers view on resisting the violence imposed by ideal gender norms. Mizuho is ok with the way she and her family are living and does not give in to the bullying of her or her family members, as a matter of fact she is resisting them in the school yard. It is important that Mizuho "resist(s) the violence that is imposed by ideal gender norms, especially against those who are gender different, who are nonconforming in their gender presentation"(Butler, 2011). In this way, Mizuho also encourages "resignification" of others by resisting the ideal norms. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler acknowledged that the process of resignification alone does not consistently result in a subversive transformation of established gender norms and social power dynamics. There, Butler argues that "resignification" must be situated within the context of radical democratic theory and questions whether the resignification can lead to a ''[...] less violent [and] more inclusive population'' (Butler, 2004, p. 225). In other words, by resisting the norms over and over again, Mizuho and her family can contribute to changing the [meaning of the] norms rather than trying to reject them. As long as Mizuho and her family demonstrate that *kazoku* can mean something else by performing repetitively

[32] On the missing father/male figure. We don't know if the donors were anonymous or known and therefore don't know if the children have any contact or tried to contact their biological father. The narrative suggests Mizuho is happy with two mothers and does not seem affected by not having a father. The thesis having its limits the missing father figure is a topic left for further research. It is possible to argue that without a father in the household the women in Murata's story are freed from social expectations of the conventional household. See my previous unpublished course work "Home Cooking in the Japanese Queer Home" (Keryell, 2022) and Sherif Ann's chapter on "Japanese without Apology: Yoshimoto Banana and Healing" (1999) for further information on the missing father/male figure.

[33] "*Ā, ano hito wa iwayuru [futsū no hito] dakara. Seken no han'nō nante sin'na mono desho*" (Murata, 2019, p.120)

[34] "*Yoshiko ōkasan, yokan ni rikai shitemoraou nante kitai shiteru no? Jibun-tachi ga yokereba ītte omowanai kono saki yatte ikenai to omou yo*" (Murata, 2019, p. 120)

themselves, others will gradually come to understand that *kasoku* can have different meanings.

4.2.3.1 Lost in translation

An important aspect that shows that Mizuho has indeed integrated their way of living is the fact that she addresses both mothers with their given name followed by the affix *Okāsan* (Mom).

Mizuho addresses her biological mother as *Yoshiko Okāsan* (Yoshiko Mom) and her non-biological mother as *Kikue Okāsan* (Kikue Mom). She does not address Yoshiko only by *Okāsan*. One could debate that this is because Mizuho is still too young to know how she was born and therefore does not know who her biological parent is. However, as we have seen, Mizuho is a reflected girl and is aware of her family situation and the reader can therefore assume that Mizuho does in fact know who her birthmother is. Nevertheless, Mizuho addresses both mothers equally, just like her mothers raise her and her sisters "[…] equally, regardless of who gave birth to them" (Murata, 2019/2022, p.53). In other words, this reaffirms the fact that Mizuho has fully assimilated their unconventional family lifestyle. For the English-speaking readers this nuance, however, is lost in translation. In the UK translation of *Seimeishiki* (Life Ceremony, 2022) Mizuho addresses her biological mother exclusively as Mom, and her non-biological mother as Kikue Mom. In the English version when talking to Yoshiko Mizuho says "Mom, do you really expect society to understand? As long as we're ok with things, why should it bother us?" (Murata, 2019/2022, p.53), whereas when talking about Kikue she says, "I'm worried about Kikue Mom of course, but I'm also worried about you [Mom]" (Murata, 2019/2022, p.55). In the original version "you[35]" is written as *Yoshiko Okāsan* and "Kikue Mom" as *Kikue Okāsan*. By differentiating the titles of the biological mother and non-biological mother in the translated version, this distinction is made clearer.

As seen in the context chapter on ART, Kathryn E. Goldfarb finds in her decade-long research that Japanese "often claim that "blood ties" are central to Japanese kinship" (2018, p. 182). She argues that public discourses on assisted reproductive technology in Japan

[35] The Japanese word for "you" (*anata*) is used differently than in English, therefore Mizuho says *Yoshiko Okāsan* instead of *anata* in the original work. Put simply *Anata* is usually used three ways, either by wives addressing their husbands to show affection, to call out someone or to signify a generic "you" in questionnaires.

contribute to this mindset by standardizing the possibility of having a biologically related child and thus reinforcing the idea of *kazoku* as a biologically related unit. Nonetheless, as Harada points out, Murata's focus on reproductive technology in her works is not about simulating the norm of a biologically related family, but rather "to create a new form of family or *kazoku* built on "scientific" sexless (re)production" (2021, p. 113). And so, the nuance of Mizuho not differentiating her biological mother from her non-biological mother by using the same titles comes to support Murata's vision in that reproductive technology is not about recreating biologically related family, but rather to create an alternative form of *kazoku*. Most English-speaking readers will probably not notice this nuance and remain convinced that Yoshiko, Kikue and their three daughters have embraced kinship "beyond blood ties[36]." Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Murata does not favorize biological lineage over non-biological lineage.

4.2.4 Two's Family

"*Nureta gami o kawakasu kazoku no te, sono mukōgishi ni yukigeshiki……"*

(Murata, 2019, p. 124)

"*The hand of my family dries my wet hair, a snow scene on the opposite bank…"*

(Murata, 2019/2022, p. 57)

The above quote is from Kikue reciting her latest poem about Yoshiko who dries her hair in the hospital room. Although the word family or *kazoku* usually involves several members, to Kikue, Yoshiko is the family. While admitted at the hospital Kikue and Yoshiko's daughters come to visit Kikue, but also rush back to their busy lives. Kikue, feeling a little low, mutters that "In the end it's just the two of us, isn't it[37]." To this Yoshiko replied that it has always been just the two of them, and that is what family is. That the children always leave the nest[38]

[36] Refers to Goldfarb's book title *Beyond Blood Ties* (2018)
[37] "*Kekkyoku, futari na no nē. […] Kikue ga tsubuyaita*" (Murata, 2019, p.21-22)
[38] *Zutto futari datta janai. Kazoku nante sonna mon yo. Kodomo wa habataite iku nda.*" (Murata, 2019, p.22)

implying that family ultimately consists of the life partners one meets. This opinion is found in other of Murata's works including *Shōmetsu sekai* where Harada concludes that the novel shows that female friend companionships "[…] are seen as more valuable than biological lineage, as Ami [a character friend of the protagonist] considers female friends […] as potential life partners." (Harada, 2021, p. 120)

Yoshiko decides that if Kikue were to die, she would become her chief mourner, not her former lovers, not anyone else. The notion of mourning is a theme Judith Butler has taken interest in. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks in 2015 and as a follow-up of her book *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) Butler posted a blog post titled *"Precariousness and Grievability—When is life grievable?"* (2015). The post explores the concept of grievability in the context of war "by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable." Butler argues that the celebration of a new life presupposes an implicit understanding that life is grievable—meaning it would be mourned if lost. The idea of "a life has been lived" is seen as a condition for the emergence and sustenance of life. Without the recognition of grievability, life is considered something other than life, and the apprehension of grievability is essential for acknowledging the precarious nature of living beings. Following this argument, Yoshiko's resolution to become Kikue's "chief mourner" can be seen as the ultimate devotion to being family.

In short, although Yoshiko and Kikue have three children that are present in their lives, these have left the home, and Yoshiko and Kikue are left together alone, just as in the start of their companionship journey. Enhanced by its explicit title "Futari Kazoku" (Two's Family), Yoshiko and Kikue's companionship can be interpreted as the strongest and most permanent form of *kazoku*, suggesting that *kazoku* should be regarded as a two persons' matter.

5 Single parenthood in Kawakami's *Natsu Monogatari*

In this chapter I will first give a summary of the plot of *Nastu Monogatari*, and then present the novel's style and theme. In the discussion part look at selected characters from the novel, and through these I argue that the author Kawakami is presenting her view that single

parenthood provides an alternative form of *kazoku* and that this form of family can be seen as freeing women from the contemporary normative marital family unit. I start by describing Rika Yusa and show through her why the normative *kazoku* is bound to uphold systemic inequalities between men and women. Then I look at Rie Konno and show through her character that the traditional, or biological family don't guarantee genuine connections. Then, through the protagonist Natsuko I examine how not only the formal (medical discourse), but also the informal (friends and family) social pressure reinforces the idea the idea of *kazoku* as a heteronormative and biologically related unit by excluding ART to those who do not fill in the criteria. Lastly, I argue that the novel solves the dilemma of *the right to know one's origins* by allowing the child of Natsuko born through AID to know its origins and even form a bond to her biological father if she wishes to do so.

By analyzing the selected characters of Book Two, we gain an understanding of Kawakami's views on the normative family unit.

5.1 Summary of *Natsu Monogatari*

Natsu Monogatari[39] is divided into two books. Book One centers around 39-year-old Makiko and her 12-year-old daughter Midoriko's three-day visit to Tokyo from Osaka to see their sister and aunt, the protagonist, Natsuko Natsume, a 30-year-old unpublished writer. Makiko who is also in Tokyo for a breast augmentation consultation, struggles with her daughter's silence, who communicates only through writing. Natsuko's first-person narrative recounts her memories of childhood and family tragedy, while Midoriko's journal entries reveal her thoughts on puberty and her mother's choices.

Book Two, which is the focus of this thesis, is also told from the perspective of Natsuko through first-person narration, eight years later. The book opens at a gathering with

[39] For clarification, Kawakami's *Natsu Monogatari* (2019) is an extended and adjusted version of her 2008 novella "Chichi to Ran". The English translation *Breasts and Eggs* is based on *Natsu Monogatari*. In an English-language X/Twitter post from October 2020 (Fincher, 2023), Kawakami sought to clarify the writing process of the book tweeting that "It seems there are some misunderstandings of the facts" and that "I think it's important to clear a few things up." She then tweeted "I wrote Breasts and Eggs [*Natsu Monogatari*] from scratch in 2019. I used the same characters and settings of the novella I had written ten years ago, but both Book One and Book Two of Breasts and Eggs [*Natsu Monogatari*] were written in 2019 and it's a completely different book from the novella."(Kawakami, 2020, as cited in Fincher, 2023). Furthermore, in a more recent New York Times Magazine story, Kawakami expanded on the matter. "I put everything I had into ["Chichi to Ran"]. I put everything I felt into it. But after 10 years, I knew that there was room to build on its philosophy of feminism, and I better understood the changes that women go through" (Hunt, 2023). "Chichi to Ran" (2008) was not translated into English. "Chichi to Ran" translates as breasts and eggs and is published under the same name in other languages (e.g., the 2012 French translation "Seins et Oeufs" and the 2013 Norwegian translation "Pupper og Egg"). *Natsu Monogatari* is a wordplay and can translate as Summer Stories or Natsu's Stories (i.e., The protagonist's stories), but was published in English under the name *Breasts and Eggs*.

Natsuko's former colleagues where one of them asks if the others would be willing to donate a kidney to their dying husband. While the question is relevant to the married women, it does not apply to Natsuko being the only single woman in the group.

Natsuko has become a published writer but is struggling with the second novel she is currently writing. She is also having trouble with her desire to have a child as she is single and incapable of having sex. She was in a relationship when she was younger but discovered that she could not tolerate sex leading the relationship to an end. Curious about single parenthood she looks up other methods of conception and starts obsessing about donor conception. Rika Yusa, a popular fellow author she meets through a literary event quickly becomes her friend, and her aspiration–embracing motherhood as a single parent *and* having a successful career.

Natsuko attends an event hosted by the association Children of Donors and meets Jun Aizawa and Yuriko Zen, both children of donors whom she had read about earlier in a book. Aizawa shares his experience of learning the truth about his anonymous biological father after his non-biological father died. Yuriko, Natsuko learns later, was sexually abused by her non-biological father and friends of his and is strongly against having children as she finds it selfish and cruel. Aizawa and Natsuko exchange emails and start writing to each other and later meet for coffee. He tells her about how he learned the truth about his biological father through his grandmother who claimed he was no grandson of hers, and Natsuko tells him about her wish to have a child through AID.

As time passes by Natsuko develops feelings for Aizawa, however, he is in a relationship with Yuriko. One evening when having dinner with Rika and their mutual editor Ryoko Sengawa, Natsuko shares her desire to have a child on her own. Rika is very supportive, however, Sengawa criticizes the idea saying Natsuko should focus more on her current book and that authors turn mediocre once they have children. Natsuko's sister, Makiko, also strongly opposes the idea at first asking if Natsuko understands what it means to raise a child on one's own. Driven by desperation and lack of support from her closest, Natsuko meets up with an independent sperm donor named Onda. It turns out, however, that he is seeking to exchange sperm for sexual favors. Natsuko flees the scene and runs into Yuriko on the same night. The two end up having a conversation where Yuriko says that it doesn't matter where the child comes from, but rather that it is born at all, and that parents are selfish as they are willing to make their child suffer for the "experience" of becoming a parent.

Affected both by the incident with Onda and by Yuriko's belief, Natsuko gives up her

desire of having a child and breaks of communication with Aizawa. Later, Natsuko gets sick and thinks about how no one knows about it. She receives a call from Aizawa saying he has not seen Yuriko for some time now and confesses his feelings for Natsuko, however, she rejects him. Although it sounds like a dream come true, Natsuko says it has no meaning and cannot commit to such a relationship. Soon after she learns through Rika that Sengawa had died of cancer, and the two authors are in shock as they did not even know she was sick in the first place.

Back in Osaka for her niece Midoriko's birthday, Natsuko is faced with her multifaced sorrow when stopping by her old apartment building. Aizawa, who was also in Osaka at the time calls and asks to meet her so they can talk. After reconciliation Aizawa suggests he be the father of Natsuko's child. Later, they agree on an arrangement where Natsuko will be raising and providing for the child on her own, but that Aizawa may take part in the child's life later if the child wishes so. Two years later Natsuko has become pregnant with Aizawa's baby through AID and Makiko and Midoriko are preparing to help Natsuko in her postpartum journey while Rika is checking in on how things are going with her new editor all whilst giving her advice on baby equipment. The book ends with Natusko giving birth to her daughter.

5.1.1 Style and theme

Natsu Monogatari is written from the first-person point of view, giving the reader intimate access to the main character's thoughts, feelings and understanding of the societal norms. Natsuko's reflections center around the conversations she has with the different characters of the story and her own struggles and experiences.

The language is familiar and conversational. The text includes the Osaka dialect between the protagonist and some of the other characters which conveys a certain warmth and camaraderie when they slip into dialect. While numerous discussions revolve around the subject of the human body, particularly the female body, the portrayals and use of language tend to remain relatively neutral. Indeed, Tørring made a point that it is remarkable how much the novel surpasses intimate bodily boundaries and yet manages not to be sexual in its language (Tørring & Kaminka, 2023). This allows certain characters to evoke strong emotions when being vulgar, such as Rie Konno, a former colleague of Natsuko, when condemning her mother as "free labor with a pussy" (BookRags.com Staff Writer, 2021, p. 61).

Structurally, the novel consists of two books marking an eight-year gap and a shift in narrative priority. In contrast to Book One, which centers Makiko and Midoriko's three-day visit, Book Two's narration focuses on Natsuko's day-to-day events and reflections as they happen, mostly over the course of a year.

Natsuko's internal dilemma with her desire to have a child is paramount to Book Two. At times, Natsuko's storytelling takes on a different style than the usual one when she is conveying her experiences of daydreams or dreams allowing the reader to capture the unique qualities of Natsuko's internal state.

The course of events is mostly in the narrative present following a chronological timeline. Sometimes the reader gets a lookback at Natsuko's past, especially her early childhood. The clear descriptions of months, seasons and time of the year might suggest Natsuko's awareness of time passing by and her biological clock ticking as she tries to decide on whether to have a child or not, and if it is possible at all.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 Faces of womanhood

As pointed out by Alzate and Yoshio (2022, pp. 468–469), "the novel addresses a plethora of gendered themes […] through a glimpse into the lives of others, each with their own pasts and memories […]" very much centered around the family dynamics and "Natsuko is there to listen—just as the reader is invited to listen." Indeed, Magne Tørring commented that Japanese literature often is "unfiltered", taking on the role of depicting situations and sensory impressions[40] (Tørring & Kaminka, 2023). He explains that rather than the big societal problems, it is the individuals and their value that preoccupies Kawakami in her works[41] (Tørring & Kaminka, 2023). In *Natsu Monogatari* no one is "morally correct" and there is no right or wrong answer to the countless questions the novel takes on (Alzate & Yoshio, 2022, p. 468). The portrayed characters and their lives help Natsuko navigate in her quest for parenthood, struggling with the ultimate question of *"who has the right to have a child?"*

[40] Original statement in Norwegian: *"Japansk litteratur er ufiltrert. I japansk litteratur handler det ofte om å skildre situasjoner og sannseinntrykk."*(Tørring & Kaminka, 2023)
[41] Original statement in Norwegian: "*Det er ikke de store samfunnsproblemene, men enkelmenneske og enkeltmenneskets verdi som opptar Kawakami*." (Tørring & Kaminka, 2023)

5.2.1.1 Rika and the systemic inequality

Having a pragmatic approach to life both as a single parent and as a professional writer, at first glance Rika Yusa comes across the epitome of the modern woman–as in a 20th century independent woman–to both Natsuko and the reader. However, the get-together of the married women introduced at the beginning of Book Two in many ways define the idea of the ideal modern woman, still very much embedded in the *modern love ideology* and the *ryōsai kenbo* construction. In fact, the reader is not informed of Natsuko having become a published writer until later, suggesting that within the context of normative lifestyles, Natsuko, and thus Rika, are overlooked solely because of their unmarried status.

Still, Rika does not seem too affected by not fitting in, on the contrary, just like Kikue in Chapter 4, Rika is not afraid to speak her mind, and goes lengths to support Natsuko (and presumably other women) in her quest of an alternative form of *kazoku*.

Rika believes that due to systemic inequalities men and women can never understand each other, the one blaming the other for their fault (Kawakami, 2019, p. 387). Especially the pain, how much it hurts to be a woman, is something men could never grasp (Kawakami, 2019, p. 387). In the end, she says, when women will no longer have babies and the reproductive process can be separated from the female body, "we can look back at this time, when women and men tried to live together and raise families, as some unfortunate episode in human history" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 315).

5.2.1.2 Rie, the biological disconnection and the scissors

Rie Konno is a former co-worker of Natsuko. The reader is introduced to Rie at the beginning of Book Two during a gathering with other former female co-workers. Just like Natsuko, Rie does not feel she fits into this group as she neither values her marriage and the relationship to her husband, and she senses the other women's disapproval of her still working (although part-time) and not conforming to the traditional expectations of marriage. Rie and Natsuko meet up on Christmas Day where she tells Natsuko how she feels disconnected from her family.

Chapter 12 (p. 271-311) *Tanoshi Kurisumasu* (*a fun Christmas*) opens on Christmas Day at an event on the ethics of artificial insemination. One of the topics presented is the dilemma that

children conceived through AID are not often told the truth about their parentage and seldom ever find out who their biological parents are. A religious woman in the audience argued that children should be conceived and raised in "real/proper homes" (Kawakami, 2019, p. 276). To this, Natsuko replies that it is not a question of whether one is conceived through AID or not, emphasizing that biological ties don't guarantee genuine connections.

Later the same day Natsuko and Rie make the spontaneous decision to meet up at a restaurant and Rie opens about her husband's clinical depression. Rie's daughter is with her husband in his hometown Wakayama where they are all moving due to his depression. Her stepmother had opposed Rie and her daughter staying behind in Tokyo over the season holidays as it would "look bad[42]" on their marriage. Being away from her daughter has not triggered any longing or loneliness, and Rie mentions a potential lack of strong bond[43] with her daughter. After giving birth to her Rie suffered from postpartum depression, but her husband showed no empathy. On the contrary, he scolded her and urged her to get a grip of herself attributing having a child to a natural part of a woman's life[44]. Rie herself has a strained relationship with her mother who has always stood by her father's side even if he abused her. Before parting, Rie gifts Natsuko her lily-of-the-valley pattern pair of scissors that Natsuko had mentioned she liked while they were working together in the book shop.

The event taking place on Christmas day juxtaposes AID "against the backdrop of the immaculate conception of Christ", questioning who and what gives women the authority to conceive (BookRags.com Staff Writer, 2021, p. 31). The religious holiday also frames the disagreement between Natsuko and the woman acting as a figure of authority in their argument about "whether and when woman should be allowed to conceive on her own" (BookRags.com Staff Writer, 2021, p. 32).

Furthermore, meeting on Christmas day, a day usually spent with family, says something about how Natsuko and Rie, especially Rie, view traditional families and comes to support Natsuko's argument from the event, that traditional families don't guarantee genuine connections. Natsuko had in fact questioned "What, exactly, qualifies as a 'real' family? Or a

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[42] *"Gibo-teki ni wa watashi to musume o Tōkyō de futari ni suru no ga iyadatta mitaida ne. Sonomama nige rareru to omotta n janai. Sakini musuko to mago o kotchi ni yokoshite, sore de susumeyou toka itte kite. Musuko fūfu ga setto de kaette kuru no wa īkedo, musuko hitorida to teisaigawarui to omotta no kamo ne. Motomoto Asa Na mo hitori ja jikka ni nanka kaerenai kuchidattashi ne."*(Kawakami, 2019, p. 297)

[43] *"Musume no koto wa sukidayo, sugoku kawaiishi ne. Demo, nante iu ka en ga usui no kamo na tte omoukoto, nankai ka atta na."*(Kawakami, 2019, p. 298)

[44] "*'Shussan nanka on'nanara dekite atarimae no koto de, nani itsu made ōgesa ni shindoi ittenda yo' tte ittanda yo ne. 'Ninshin mo shussan mo shizen'na kotodaro? Uchi no ofukuro mo, hoka no hito mo min'na dekiteru koto nanoni, omae wa ōgesa nan da yo.'"* (Kawakami, 2019, pp. 298–299)

'real' home? If the world is full of these 'real' families, why all the abuse? Why do some parents murder their own children?[45]" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 230). Rie refers to her husband as a *tannin*,[46] a stranger, a term Murata also has employed for male spouses in a dialogue between two female friends in her novel *Shōmetsu Sekai* (2015). Harada points out that the usage of the word *tannin* in "their conversation raises a question about the need for maintaining heterosexual marriage and family systems for reasons other than having children" (Harada, 2021, p. 120)

Rie's abusive father, her "subservient mother" (Alzate & Yoshio, 2022, p. 475), and her lack of connection with her daughter reinforces Natsuko's argument. Rie understands if her daughter comes to hate her when she grows up, as Rie herself, "is set to live the same life her mother did, repeating the unending cycle where women are oppressed victims and perpetrators of patriarchal society" (Alzate & Yoshio, 2022, p. 475).

In English speaking countries lilies of the valley often symbolize "motherhood", and therefore one way the imagery of the lilies-patterned scissors in the novel has been interpreted is how they "foreshadow Natsuko eventually giving birth" and evoke the "cutting of the umbilical cord after a birth" (BookRags.com Staff Writer, 2021, pp. 32–33)[47]. However, the same connotation of the flowers is not attributed in Japan and given Rie's character and her resilience towards the traditional *kazoku*, another maybe more probable way of analyzing the imagery of the scissors is how she is giving up fighting for her individuality and empowerment.

Indeed scissors have been associated with women's empowerment, recently in the Mahsa Amini protests in Iran (Millington, 2022), but also in literature through their imagery of the female anatomy, the shape resembling a vagina. As an example, in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), during the first encounter of the protagonist, Clarissa, and a man named Peter, Peter takes out his pocket-knife and moves it towards Clarissa's dress. To this, Clarissa just opens her scissors as a response. This passage has been interpreted as the knife, a phallic symbol, representing Peter's masculinity (Connors, 2022, p. 4; *Feminist Literary Criticism*, n.d.), and the scissors, a yonic symbol, representing Clarissa matching Peter's

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[45] "*'Chanto shita katei toka kazoku tte nandesu ka? Tatoeba sono kamisama ni kodomo o sazukete moratta chanto shita katei de, dōshite gyakutai ga okoru ndesu ka. Dōshite oya ni korosa reru kodomo ga iru ndesu ka'"*(Kawakami, 2019, p. 277)

[46] "The idea of tanin or a stranger refers to someone outside of "blood ties" (ketsu'en)" (Harada, 2021, p. 120)

[47] The date and page numbers of the reference appear only once the study guide is downloaded as a PDF file, they are not listed on the website as it is.

masculinity through her femininity. In other words, Clarissa is dismissing Peter's intruding masculinity and need for dominance through the imagery of the scissors (*Feminist Literary Criticism*, n.d.).

The representations of vagina is often used in the area of feminist research, most recently Ueno Chizuko selected "reproductions of Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" series" to illustrate her collection of newspaper and magazine in a volume entitled *Women's Play*, causing "considerable controversy" (Sandra Buckley, 2023, p. 273). By giving away her beloved pair of scissors, or what can be interpreted as her womanhood or *her vagina*, Rie takes on the same path as her mother once did, becoming, in her words, "free labor with a pussy[48]"(Kawakami, 2020, p. 249). Rie says she won't need the scissors anymore in Wakayama foreshadowing her quitting work and becoming an extension of her husband, taking on the role as a housewife and eventually losing her individual identity like many women held in marriage.

5.2.1.3 Natsuko, social control and the reconsiliation

"*Honma ni jibun wa onna nankanatte, tokodoki omou yo na*."
(Kawakami, 2019, p. 385)

"*Sometimes I wonder if I'm really a woman*"
(Kawakami, 2020, p. 312)

The above quote is from a conversation between Natsuko and Rika when Natsuko told Rika for the first time her desire to have a baby. Since the start of Book Two Natsuko's wish to "meet" her baby is strong. As she explains to Aizawa it's not that she *wants* them, but she wishes to *meet* her child and live with them (Kawakami, 2019, p. 338). However, being single and not enjoying sex it makes it difficult.

She recalls her previous and only intimate and sexual relationship with a man named Naruse where she felt it was her duty, "as a woman, to fulfill his–and in general men's–sexual desires[49]" (Kawakami, 2019, p. 208). Natsuko wonders if her not wanting to have sex

[48] *"[…] Watashi no hahaoya tte 'manko tsuki rōdōryoku' datta nda yo."* (Kawakami, 2019, p. 301)
[49] "*Watashi wa Naruse-kun no, to iu yori mo otoko no hito no—seitekina motome ni wa kanarazu ōjinakereba naranai to omoikonde ita no da."* (Kawakami, 2019, p.208)

disqualifies her as a being a 'woman'. And so she asks herself if not having a partner or not wanting to have sex gives her no right to have a child. When Rika, however, shows her support to Natsuko having a child through AID, Natsuko for the first time in the novel feels like she has the power to do anything, including having a child[50] (Kawakami, 2019, p. 398). The intensity of her positive emotions underscores the profound need for support in this endeavor, yet it also predicts a moment of conflict as soon after both her editor Sengawa and her sister Makiko strongly disapprove of her choice, criticizing every aspect of her from her lack of work ethics, her low income, her incapability to grasp what it means to raise a child on her own, and even her physical looks. Sengawa opposes the idea of Natsuko using AID saying that the child should be the product of a love between two persons (Kawakami, 2020, p. 319), thus reinforcing the idea of *kazoku* as a heteronormative and biologically related unit.

Natsuko is deeply affected by the reaction of her friends and considers giving up the dream of having a child. Just like we have seen in Murata's novellas, the women of *Natsu Monogatari* reinforce gender expectations and social conformity, just as much as, if not more than men. Glennon Doyle sums this well as "the epitome of womanhood is to lose one's self completely. That is the end goal of every patriarchal culture. Because a very effective way to control women is to convince women to control themselves"(Doyle, 2020).

Nevertheless, she does not give into the process of resignification, on the contrary, her sister Makiko comes to accept Natsuko's choice and wishes to be a part of her new life as she says she is "her sister" (Kawakami, 2019, p. 521) insinuating that family sticks together.

In Osaka, after reconciling with Aizawa, he tells her about his father, the man who raised him. Aizawa wished he found out his father was not his biological father before. Then he could have told him that "it didn't change the way [he] felt, that he was still [his] dad, as far as [he] was concerned" (Kawakami, 2020).

His father used to tell him stories about the Voyager 1 and 2 space probes, launched in the seventies to explore our solar system, including the golden record containing information about humanity. Aizawa reflects on his father's comforting words during challenging times, reminding him to think about the Voyager, a constant presence overhead and a symbol of enduring exploration and resilience. Later, when Natsuko gives birth Kawakami incorporates

[50] *"Shikamo watashi no baai wa tsūfū de wa naku, yorokobi to miwake ga tsukanai chikaradzuyoi kimochidatta. Watashi ni mo dekiru, fukanō na koto wanai, dare no kodomo demo kamai wa shinai, watashi ga umeba watashi no ko nano da —— sore wa watashi ga kore made ajiwatta koto no nai ban'nōkan datta."* (Kawakami, 2019, p.398)

space metaphors, particularly in the final pages detailing the labor and delivery. The inclusion of space imagery can be seen as a reference to the earlier conversation with Aizawa about the Voyager probes and the vastness of space. The purposeful use of nebulae and stars[51] as her daughter is being born can be seen as mirroring the ungraspable nature of both childbirth and the universe, drawing a poignant parallel between the cosmic and intimate aspects of life.

The closing of the novel suggests a happy ending. In many ways Natsuko has surpassed her aspirational friend Rika when it comes to what a woman can have and do with her life. Not only does she have a promising career and a new editor with whom she gets along, she also has the child as she wished for, however, she is not bound by the normative *kazoku*. She has no husband and no sexual "duties", still she has a family. she has "her partner–the baby's dad" (Kawakami, 2019, p. 531) whom she can rely on, and her extended family Makiko and Midoriko; and even Rika can be considered as family. Together with Aizawa, Natsuko also solves the dilemma of *the right to know one's origins* by allowing the child to know its origins and even form a bond to her biological father if she wishes to do so.

6 Conclusion

The thesis has attempted to answer the research question of how the selected texts free women from the heteronormative family institution by creating alternative forms of *kazoku*.

To answer this question, the thesis has relied on literary analysis, and drawn on key aspects of queer theory, as seen in Chapter 2 on the theoretical framework. In particular, the thesis uses the concept of "kinship", "performativity" and "resignification" as developed by Judith Butler to show how the characters through new forms of *kazoku* contribute to changing the meaning of established norms.

Chapter 3 gave a contextual overview. Beginning with *the modern love ideology* redefining

[51] "*Sore wa, haruka nanman'nen mo, nan'okunen mo hanareta tokoro de oto mo naku kokyū o shite iru seiundatta. Kurayami no naka de aritoarayuru iro ga uzu o maki, kemuri, shinshin wa mabatakinagara, sokode shizuka ni iki o shite ita. Watashi wa me o mihiraite, sore o mita. Sono moya wa, sono nōtan wa —— komiagete kuru namida no fukurami no naka de shizukana kokyū o kurikaeshi, watashi wa mabatakimosezu ni, sono hikari o mitsumete ita. Watashi wa te o nobashite, sono hikari ni fureyou to shita."* (Kawakami, 2019, p. 542)

marital love for self-expression and gender equality, I then explored the current landscape of artificial insemination with donor sperm (AID) and legal aspects of assisted reproductive technology (ART) in Japan. I argue that, pretending to promote the child's well-being, ART is intentionally presented as exclusive to heterosexual married couples, reinforcing the heteronormative notion of *kazoku*. Concluding the chapter, I summarized Japan's evolving landscapes from the 1970s to the 2000s before focusing on the authors. I examined the critical reception of their works and looked into the themes within their literary contributions and scholarly discourse. Highlighting both similarities and differences in their writings we gain a better understanding of their narratives.

In the discussion chapters 4 and 5 I argue that Murata and Kawakami engage in the current discourse surrounding the normative *kazoku* by creating fictions where those who fall outside of societal norms are able to reproduce and create a family on their own. Through the appropriation of ART the stories depict alternative forms of *kazoku* such as female friendship companionship and single parenthood that I interpret as more favorable to women.

A common denominator in all three stories is that the women are asked to account for their choices. In “Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke”, although Yoshiko did everything by the book in her marriage, she still must defend herself for why she chose not to have sexual intercourse with her husband to conceive. In the reaction of acquaintances her husband is never questioned or held accountable. As for Yoshiko and Kikue’s partnership in “Futari Kazoku”, it would have been praised if they were sisters, or accepted if they were two single mothers struggling to make ends meet. Yoshiko’s friend would rather have her pretend that she and Kikue are two single mothers sharing a flat because “they are struggling to make ends meet” rather than being lesbians, demonstrating the views on being lesbian and queer in contemporary Japan. In *Natsu Monogatari* Natsuko is let down by her closest when wanting to have a child in an unconventional way. In other words, there is no way to “opt out” if the individual does not conform a hundred percent to the cultural norms. In this sense neither of the narratives frees the female characters completely from the cultural hegemony. However, the authors do offer them more livable and favorable alternatives. Through the act of performing new forms of *kazoku* the stories gesture toward a way of resisting the normative views on family and encourage resignification from the others leading, hopefully, to a more inclusive society.

Common to all stories is the removal of sex from the family equation suggesting a

liberation of the women from the ideologies and practices of family as a (legal) heterosexual loving reproductive unit. Put simply, marriage (or a relationship) does not need to accommodate for sex for pleasure or for sex for reproduction. In this way Murata's and Kawakami's stories are deconstructing the *modern love ideology* introduced in the Meiji period where the idea of love would save the wives from a marriage where they were "treated as an object existing to fulfill male sexual desires and procreative needs" By appropriating ART "Murata envisions an alternative (re)productive future by reconfiguring the process of pregnancy and the familial system" (Harada, 2021, p.108). The same can be said about Kawakami's *Natsu Monogatari*. In this way Murata and Kawakami enable those who fall outside of societal norms— either by being asexual, or in sexless marriages, or queer—to reproduce.

In conclusion, through "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke", "Futari Kazoku" and *Natsu Monogatari*, I argue that the authors are presenting their view that female friendship companionship–with or without children–(Murata) and single parenthood (Kawakami) make for a better form of *kazoku* and that these forms of family can be seen as freeing women from the contemporary normative family unit.

6.1 Themes for further research

This thesis has primarily focused on analyzing how alternative forms of *kazoku* free women from the normative family in Kawakami's and Murata's selected stories, particularly through the appropriation of assisted reproductive technology. However, there are other angles and observations that would be interesting to research further which include, motherhood versus parenthood and its gender roles implications, the remaining patriarchal structures, the father/male figures–both the lack of them and the way in which some of the male characters challenge patriarchal ideals–and finally class-gender issues.

Firstly, the idea of motherhood changes and gains new significance. Without a present father in the picture, motherhood takes on a larger significance, that of parenthood. In this context it would be interesting to examine if the mothers in the selected texts can be regarded as solely parents, and thus removing gender roles. In addition to the analyzed alternative families, a closer look at the family dynamics of Makiko and Midoriko from Book One, and the

alternative family Makiko, Midoriko, Natsuko and her baby, and to some extend Rika, would be a good place to start.

In this regard, as mentioned in footnote 32, the missing male/father would be interesting to explore further to see to what extend gender roles are embedded in these families. Although the selected narratives suggest most of the women and children are happy without husbands and fathers, arguably freeing them from the expectations of the conventional household, it is noteworthy to observe the recurrent nature of discussions about men, due to the patriarchal structure being so indoctrinated in every facet of life.

Which leads us to the question, how can women be freed from the remaining patriarchal structures after the men have been removed from the family unit. This would be interesting to look at with Butler's notions of "resistance", "performativity" and "resignification".

As a follow up question, "could alternative families include men *and* erase the institutionalized expectations of both sexes?" In many ways one can say that Natsuko and Aizawa find love and fulfill the criteria of *modern love ideology* in terms of expression of selfhood and self-development and creating male-female equality. However, they don't "institutionalize" their love. They find another arrangement outside of the frames of marriage as an institution. It would be interesting to debate Aizawa and Natusko's future relationship, as well as his degree of involvement with the child.

It is noteworthy that the men depicted in *Natsu Monogatari* also challenge patriarchal ideals, Aizawa, as we have seen in a positive connotation, but also those who don't fulfill the "duties" of the normative family in the sense that they either don't provide financial stability like Rie's husband who's unemployed due to his depression, or Rika's and Kura's absent ex-husband and father; or that they don't provide an heir like Aizawa's non-biological father who was infertile. It would be interesting to analyze the men of the *Natsu Monogatari*, and how various factors from a feminist perspective could maybe also be regarded as liberating the men from the patriarchal ideals.

Additionally, when looking at the missing male/father figure, especially in *Natsu Monogatari*, it would be interesting to do so through the intersectionality of class and gender "as it complicates the narrative of what it means to be a mother in a poor, working-class neighborhood where father figures are either abusive or absent" (Alzate & Yoshio, 2022, p. 471). Here, Alzate and Yoshio refer mostly to Book One, however the opposite can be said of

Book Two, where wealth also ties women to social obligations (e.g., Jun Aizawa's mother). No matter the amount women's lives are controlled by money across classes.

In addition to looking at Kikue's character in "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke", the intersectionality of class and gender would be interesting to apply to some of Murata's other works, *Kobini Ningen* (2016) to mention one.

Indeed, Kawakami has said she wish "to be understood as a human writer," her focus on class being a theme she constantly revisits (Hunt, 2023). One of her translators, Sam Bett, put it boldly: "I would say that if in a hundred years Mieko is remembered only for being a feminist author, she would look back on that and be pissed" (Hunt, 2023).

Although the two authors are known to challenge society's heteronormative norms, particularly when it comes to the Japanese female condition, addressing them as only feminist authors, would be limiting. In their fiction they often not only "rethink women, but also human beings in general", and Murata especially "in a vision that is no longer anthropocentric" (Specchio, 2023b). Specchio writes that Murata "frequently explore the concept of human beings becoming like animals" (2023b). This does not apply so much for "Natsunoyo no Kuchidzuke" and "Futari Kazoku", but certainly does for some of the other short stories in her collection. This is something to keep in mind when analyzing Murata's works.

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