ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 13, No. 12, pp. 3057-3062, December 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1312.01

Fragmented Bodies, Fractured Identities: Womanhood and Body Politics in *Breasts and Eggs*

Nadia Mohammad
Department of English, Wayne State University, USA

***Abstract*—This article employs feminist theory to explore the theme of fractured femininity in Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs*. Through the three female characters in the novel, Kawakami highlights the scarring of womanhood in a contemporary, postmodern context. However, the concept of scarring follows Cixous's metaphor in which literature becomes a liberating and transformative act that vindicates the wounding of womanhood through the imposition of repressive ideals. This is shown as each of these women comes to represent the resilience of women in the face of conventional definitions of femininity. Natsuko's reluctant following of convention, Makiko's pursuit of feminine body ideals, and Midoriko's struggle with her biological self represent women's struggle to realize femininity in the 21st century. Ultimately, these women manage to sustain a level of empowerment by rejecting the socially constructed concept of femininity. Kawakami puts the concept of femininity to the test to prove that it is the result of nurture rather than nature, thus suggesting that constructing a feminine identity in a postmodern setting is much more complex than in theory.**

***Index Terms*—contemporary literature, world literature, feminism, femininity, gender identity, Mieko Kawakami**

I. Introduction

Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* is a complex tale that features female identity being wounded, manifest in various personas and components by social pressure and expectations. In the novel, Kawakami presents three women protagonists who express different aspects of an identity crisis. The protagonist and principal narrator is Natsuko, an aspiring writer based in the bustling metropolis of Tokyo who looks as far away from realizing her dream of becoming a novelist. Her sister, Makiko, visits her from their more provincial hometown of Osaka. She works in a low-rate job as a hostess, and her sole obsession in life is her appearance, especially her breasts. She brings along her daughter, Midoriko, a 12-year-old who is so horrified by life in general, especially by her mother and the idea of femininity, that she has gone voluntarily mute and only communicates in writing. These three women provide the fabric for Kawakami's exploration of the fracturing of womanhood, each touching upon various aspects of femininity and its politics. To some degree, they are the same. Natsuko provides the conscious voice, Makiko provides the unhindered impulse to project sexual-social attraction, and Midoriko serves as an overly inhibiting superego.

At the same time, there is an essential aspect regarding how technology intervenes as a mediating force in this struggle for identity. This is primarily manifested in Makiko's obsession with getting breast implants, which she believes will enhance her femininity, make her more desirable, and eventually improve her social standing. In this sense, a fundamental part of the reading provided in this article is understanding the intersections of feminine identity and technological interventions. As Gillis noted, a crucial element in the contemporary feminist project is to understand how "technology is the site of power, mapping and reading the ways in which the body is mediated by technology – whether the washing machine, the telephone or the computer" (2007, p. 332). This provides the possibility of reading Makiko's desire for technological intervention on her body as either a step toward empowerment or a step towards capitulation to archetypical masculine desires. Thus, a critical theme emerges that is central to reading *Breasts and Eggs* regarding how femininity is constituted in this postmodern, contemporary context.

This literary exploration of the topic hinges on a reading of how Kawakami uses the three women in the novel as elements to construct an often-contradictory image of femininity. In more than one way, these women's bodies become literary and figurative battlegrounds for putting conventional definitions of femininity to the test. In this sense, they can be framed through Cixous's concept of the literary scar, closely related to her idea of stigmata. Cixous proposed the body as a site where language and social expectations intersect, arguing that women's bodies, in particular, have historically been marked by language. These marks or scars can be seen as symbolic representations of how women's bodies are inscribed with patriarchal discourse, limiting their agency and self-expression. Natsuko's reluctant following of convention, Makiko's aggressive pursuit of social body ideals, and Midoriko's rejection of her physical self all represent the struggle to realize womanhood within the constraints of these expectations. However, these women also make their marks, their "stigmata," as Cixous might say, using different forms of inscription (writing, diary-keeping, body modification) in their attempt to gain agency. Consequently, this article uses Cixous's feminist theory to explore these characters in relation to the themes of the body, female identity, scarring, and fragmentation.

II. Passivity, Resistance, Acceptance: Natsuko, the Narrator

Natsuko is simultaneously transparent and dense in narrating her world. On the one hand, she is honest and direct in her observations of what is happening around her. As Alzate noted, her constant stream-of-consciousness narrative weaves in and out of the larger story without necessarily any logic (2020, p. 524). Nevertheless, her point of view is fundamental to the novel. She is the only trustworthy mediator between what happens and the reader, and even though there are some elements of randomness in Natsuko's narrative, she is mainly reliable. However, this reality embodies many inherent contradictions in her character. For example, simultaneously, she is an observant protagonist and a passive spectator. However, she appears to be more passive when contemplating her role and agency as a woman.

Consequently, Natsuko is presented as a paradoxical character who is both astute in her observations of others and naïve in her assumptions about social forces that impact her femininity. For example, she is hyperaware of her sister Makiko's physical and mental flaws and frequently makes this known. In this sense, her observations are sharp and analytical. She seems to be able to analyze her sister to the core. Nonetheless, her objectivity is patent in the fact that she withholds judgment. For example, in the early chapters, she is taken aback by what she views as her sister's grotesque obsession with obtaining breast implants. While she finds the entire process ungainly and repugnant, she finds Makiko's breasts and appearance generally unattractive. Natsuko, however, neither voices disapproval for her sister's plan nor expresses to her that her current breasts and nipples are subpar by social standards.

With the same astute skills, she observes others in the world with a razor-sharp eye, whether noting the drunkenness of a stranger on the subway or the subtle body language of an anonymous person on the street. However, when talking about her past, Natsuko's recollections appear somewhat hollow in comparison or at least surprisingly lacking in reflectiveness. An example is when she recalls her father, whom she only knew for seven years. Her description of him is almost paradoxical. She first describes him as an utterly lazy and useless figure, so burdened by his sloth that he would use a mirror to look behind himself rather than turn his body. However, she also depicts him as having a fear-inducing violent streak. While Natsuko does not describe his violence in detail, she claims he beat her mom and would always "find some reason to slap around me and my sister" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 18). This brings up questions as to why her first memory of her father is one of an utterly useless man who does nothing.

Nonetheless, this same slug of a man is capable of beating his wife and children. This contradicting image in the memory of Natsuko might be a survivor's methodology for disarming an essentially violent and unpleasant figure in her life. It might also explain, to some degree, other elements of her apparent passivity in the present, where she struggles to make ends meet and fulfill her literary ambitions. She seems trapped between different forces, such as victimhood and heroism or sexual liberation and resignation to traditional gender roles. In this sense, Natsuko seems content to merely go with the flow, allowing her life to progress without much resistance or impetus in any particular direction.

Throughout the novel, Natsuko follows along with social ideas about how feminine beauty is an immensely desirable trait, in part contemplating her lack of financial success in light of what she perceives to be a lack of beauty. There are also moments in which Natsuko's voyeurism exhibits some of the traits Gieske (2000) indicated in her discussion of how individuals internalize ideas about gender. At one point, Natsuko stares at a couple in a bathhouse, asking herself whether one member of the couple is a man or a woman, running different scenarios through her head based on what the couple is "supposed" to be. Gieske, speaking about social expectations regarding couples, asserted tbat "The unconscious production of this specific bodily regime in everyday life means that this social compulsion has gradually turned into a self-compulsion" (2010, p. 377). In this sense, Gieske suggested that individuals internalize social expectations and project them outward. Here, Natsuko, who has been highly self-regulated in her bodily regime, is perplexed by individuals who appear to be acting out roles of their choosing rather than society's choosing. Her self-compulsion to stay within the lines is juxtaposed with individuals who have refused to follow social codes and expectations regarding gender and couples.

Meanwhile, there are moments in which Natsuko overtly questions aspects of how femininity is played out socially. Alzate pointed out how Natsuko's depictions of menstruation express frustration with the monotonous nature of feminine expectations (2020, p. 523). This occurs to the extent that women are expected to undertake several socially established rituals to "protect" themselves and others from the perceived offense of menstrual blood and odors. As Natsuko complains of the tedium associated with changing pads, staining underpants, and undertaking steps to minimize the smell of her period, she is also drawing attention to the fact that this is a natural process. Listing these banal actions, which are typically undiscussed and unpronounced, is a way of pushing a female-centric discourse into the literary limelight.

To some degree, it is possible to read Natsuko's observations as a subversion of the trope of the male gaze. As Hartley (2016) noted, the male gaze, objectifying women and reducing them to devices intended for male visual pleasure, has been pervasive in postwar Japanese literature (2016, p. 92). In the case of the narrator of *Breasts and Eggs*, we find a character who overturns this device, providing an entirely non-objectifying view of femininity and instead making objective interventions related to gender. Thus, one possible reading of Natsuko's character is that she represents a crucial feminist intervention in a contemporary Japanese literary tradition where gender power relations have been largely undisturbed (Hartley, 2016, p. 92). As uninteresting as Natsuko's ruminations about the details of menstruation might seem, they nonetheless shape the everyday existence of virtually all women of reproductive age. Another way of viewing Natsuko is through the lens of Cixous's concept of the writer. Cixous asserted that "My

business is to translate our emotions into writings. First we feel. Then I write. This act of writing engenders the author. I write the genesis that occurs before the author. How does one write the genesis? Just before? I write on writing. I turn on the other light" (2005, p. 118). In this sense, Cixous's ideas on the female body as a contested site of language and culture, where patriarchal norms are inscribed, can be applied here. The women struggle with and confront societal norms, including the commodification and objectification of their bodies, and attempt to assert their agency and autonomy. Writing, the act of inscribing language and culture, thus acts as a means of resistance and liberation. These women use spoken and written language to express their desires, frustrations, and challenges, and it is this very act that makes them the protagonists of their own stories.

The final chapters underscore the complexity of Natsuko's character. In the novel's second half, she explores the intricacies of having and rearing children as she contemplates having her own. Notably, she has sharply separated the idea of having a child from that of love or sex, admitting she has had minimal and unpleasant sexual experiences. Thus, Natsuko appears only capable of envisioning reproduction through the assistance of technological intervention, specifically through in vitro fertilization. Her conversations seem cemented through her interactions with Yuriko, who views having a child as an act of violence in which an unwilling soul is forced into existence: "Why do people see no harm in having children? They do it with smiles on their faces, as if it's not an act of violence. You force this other being into the world, this other being that never asked to be born. You do this absurd thing because that's what you want for yourself, and that doesn't make any sense" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 614). At the same time, Yuriko's upbringing was also marked by abuse, albeit an even more insidious kind of abuse that she was, unlike Natsuko, unable to escape. Yuriko also stands out as an individual whose existence results from a loveless technological intervention, having been conceived by a sperm donor.

Nonetheless, there are unequivocal signs that there is a possibility of hope for all born into this cruel existence. Natsuko herself has managed to, despite the evident blasé state of her life, at least forge a small community of care and trust with her sister and niece and, previously, with her mother. Meanwhile, another friend, Aizawa, was born not through love or passion but through sperm donation. He contrasts sharply with the cynical Yuriko, proving that existence does not have to be necessarily ill-fated. By the novel's end, Natsuko has decided to have a child of her own with Aizawa and wants it enough that she is willing to undergo fertility treatment to ensure that she can do it. Interpreting the significance of this development is complex. Throughout much of the novel, Natsuko describes her aversion to sexuality and her largely indifferent attitude towards child-rearing, which, more often than not, has not been very appealing to her. Despite this, the novel ends with her bearing a daughter and seemingly perpetuating a cycle she had previously viewed as unbearable.

A pessimistic possibility is to view this as a capitulation on the part of Natsuko, who, despite her apparent willingness to resist the sexist narratives imposed on her, eventually submits to the role of a bearer of life. The other possibility is to view her decision as implementing her agency. Natsuko has decided to become a mother, but she has done it on her terms, without submitting to society's expectations regarding love or romance. Instead, she decided to have the baby with a person of her choosing, the result of a logical process rather than social pressures or expectations. At the same time, Midoriko appears to have abandoned her teenage angst-fueled horror at the thought of reproduction, even showing fascination and excitement at the prospect of her new cousin arriving. The novel concludes with Natsuko embodying the power of both breasts and eggs, cradling her newborn baby to her chest.

III. The Quest for Bodily Beauty: Makiko and Her Breasts

While Natsuko's observations of the world are the critical narrative thread in the novel, throughout *Breasts and Eggs*, it is Makiko's obsession with breast enhancement that serves as one of the central tensions. On the one hand, her obsession with getting an enlargement stimulates many of Natsuko's observations on the nature of beauty and the female essence. On the other hand, Makiko's fixation on improving her body is also the main reason for the split with her daughter Midoriko, who refuses to talk to her anymore. Makiko's focus on breast augmentation is presumably due to her job as a hostess in Osaka. This position requires her to flirt with men and incentivize the purchase of drinks at her establishment. At the same time, women are relegated to an association with consumable goods and drink (Gagné, 2010, p. 31). In this role, her greatest assets are her physical appearance and her ability to engage in conversations with the bar guests. The fact that Makiko is a hostess is already loaded with significance. As Nana Okura Gagné (2010) has noted, hostess clubs frequently reproduce gender hegemonies in which men have apportioned roles as businessmen and middle-class economic actors.

Nonetheless, Makiko has opted to invest entirely in enhancing her appearance, though her breasts appear to be her only concern. In this sense, Makiko assumes that the single most crucial body part for her to improve is her chest. Meanwhile, her sister notes that her face has aged, she is tired-looking, and she makes terrible choices in makeup and foundation. Upon realizing this, Natsuko observes that her face appears "washed out and more wrinkly than it was. When she laughed, the sinews of her neck popped out. Her sunken eyes called attention to their sockets" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 31). This view of Makiko indicates she has much more to worry about than her breasts. Despite this, Makiko cannot see anything other than the breasts of her dreams. She fixates on every aspect of her dream breast implants, including the ideal entry point and constitution. She also focuses on nipples, especially their color and shape. At one point, she engages in an entertaining dialogue with her sister on the fine points of nipple aesthetics after seeing an older

lady with apparently pink nipples. She remarks to Natsuko: “Did you see that woman’s nipples?... They were really something… It’s a miracle for Asians to be born with nipples that pink” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 83). Makiko goes on to describe, in excruciating detail, a painful-sounding chemical process designed to peel skin cells from the nipple and create the appearance of pink, rather than dark, nipples. Her only point of reference is comparing the pain of the process to breastfeeding. Makiko has integrated the concept that pink, Western-looking nipples are somehow aesthetically superior to Asian nipples that might be darker in hue. As Natsuko notes, the “preoccupation, or shame, or insatiable curiosity that drove Makiko to fixate on her breasts was about more than size alone. Color was a major factor” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 86). To this extent, it is possible to intuit that Makiko is not only driven by ideas based on gender hegemony but also fetishizes Western racial beauty ideals.

These reasons likely contribute to Makiko’s turn towards technology to overcome the limits of her nature. In this sense, a technological intervention represents the possibility of going beyond one’s genes and, by extension, one’s fate. The quest to get breast implants represents a more permanent and fixed intervention than the nipple peeling she was previously obsessed with. Breast implants require a surgeon and medical team; they represent the pinnacle of a technological intervention on the body. In this way, Makiko aspires to achieve a perfection that she cannot obtain without external help. Meanwhile, reflecting on the heroism of Makiko's breast obsession, Reiko Abe Auestad (2016) asserts that the breasts become actors themselves, driving a series of "affective responses in Midori, Natsu, as well as in Makiko herself, which, in turn, impact the pattern of interaction among them with consequences" (p. 536). The breasts thus become a fulcrum for conflict and affect as Makiko and her sister attempt to navigate the complex waters that balance personal and economic fulfillment. The breasts that Makiko dreams of thus represent the possibility of technology improving her life. They are a double-edged tool, representing her choice and agency on the one hand and caving to social and male desires on the other.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the eventual consequences of Makiko’s obsession. Besides the strained relationship with her daughter, Midoriko, the subject of the next section, the obsession also empties Makiko of herself and accelerates her breakdown. In this way, the breast obsession not only represents a desire for technological intervention but also symbolizes a distancing from her biological imperatives, such as being a mother to her daughter. She appears to be seeking something that goes beyond mere breasts. The culmination of this hidden force within Makiko’s soul comes one night when she leaves Midoriko at home with Natsuko to go out and supposedly meet an old friend in Tokyo. She returns in an extraordinary state of drunkenness, announcing her arrival with a terrible crash and struggling to stay on her two feet. While Natsuko is angry with her sister for being gone too late without telling anybody anything, what is most striking about her observations is how she perceives her sister at that moment: “Her legs were rail-thin, like a pair of disposable chopsticks. She had a tear in the foot of her pantyhose, running from her big toe to her ankle. The skin at the back of her heels was cracked and dry like old mochi. Nothing to her calves but skin and bones, like the taut stomach of a sundried fish” (Kawakami, 2020, p. 231). This description leaves the reader with the image of a desiccated, washed-out Makiko, a caricature of her misguided desires. She has become emptied of substance and meaning in her quest for breasts. This subsequently leads her daughter to have a breakdown, and she commences talking while smashing eggs that Natsuko happened to have in her apartment. Makiko also joins in the cathartic egg smashing, though the symbolism of her act differs significantly from that of her daughter. While Midoriko appears to be released from the confines of her thoughts, Makiko’s actions merely manifest shame and failure.

Here, another reading can be integrated. Alzate (2020) read Makiko's obsession with breasts as being related to the novel's double meaning: the original Japanese title, *Chichi to ran*, could be translated as either “milk and eggs” or “breasts and eggs” (2020, p. 515). In this way, Makiko's obsession may not merely be about breasts but also about motherhood. To some degree, her discontent with her own body is something she has continually blamed on motherhood, associating her unsatisfactory breast shape with giving birth and breastfeeding, which describes in tortuous terms (Shalini & Aruna, 2022, p. 28). However, beyond mere questions of how her body was impacted, Natsuko does mention their mother's death in passing. While she does not dwell on it, she implies that it had devastating consequences for the family, with the brother dying a short time later. To this end, Makiko might be aching for her own lost mother, with this deep sense of mourning causing her to not be there herself as a mother. Her lost motherhood, in this reading, drives her quest for breast enhancement, whereas her daughter’s silence indicates her absence as a mother in the present. Her identity has been entirely fractured by her own doing. She has failed as a mother, indicated by her daughter’s silence, as a woman in the world, as indicated by her dead-end job, and as a sexual object, as indicated by her lack of physical attractiveness. While technology promises to fix this identity for her, the only natural way to pick up the broken pieces will be by gazing inward.

It is possible to assert that Makiko has navigated her struggles with identity to a breaking point, much as the other characters. This might be Kawakami’s reflection on the entire concept of feminine identity. Hekman (2000), who critiqued Judith Butler's school of identity-focused feminism, provided one useful perspective. Hekman implied that focusing feminism on identity construction is an untenable route, as "promise implicit in the new feminist theory of identity and feminist identity politics, however, has not materialized" (2000, p. 290). In *Breasts and Eggs*, it might be the case that the female protagonists have abandoned the concept of identity-focused feminism as a means of empowerment. In the end, their focus on constructing their female identities ended up collapsing, and they reverted to roles that felt more familiar and innate to them. Natsuko decided to become a mother with an old friend of hers. Makiko

realized that her identity was inexorably tied to a connection with her daughter. Midoriko found that writing her identity was never going to be enough, that she instead needed to connect with her mother. In a sense, they all returned to a more primordial concept of their feminine identities.

However, it is crucial to note that the characters' primordial female states arrive through the performance of expected gender roles. Makiko personifies the acting out of "typically feminine" behavior and appearances. Her role as a hostess underscores the idea of a woman who acts in a socially expected manner. However, her desire to have her body operated on is parallel to the creation of how society marks or scars the female body, including through the pressure to conform to idealized standards of beauty, motherhood, and femininity

IV. Womanhood, Motherhood, Purpose, and Terror: Midoriko's Horrifying Eggs

Midoriko is an enigmatic figure at first; it is only through her writing that the audience understands who she is and what motivates her silence. Her diary entries fracture the narrative, just as she suffers from a fractured identity as a girl who ultimately finds her transition toward womanhood overwhelming and unbearable. Midoriko's diary entries relay a sense of shock and disgust at the elements associated with coming of age. In one scene, she is reeling at the thought of menstruating, plotting how to keep it a secret from her mother. This is a moment in which Midoriko uses the act of writing to fracture her identity both as a woman and as her mother's daughter. For example, there are moments in which Midoriko expresses a sense of rejection towards becoming like her mother, Makiko. When contemplating how some members of society might celebrate menstruation, she can only view it with a sense of utter rejection.

In one memorable scene, Midoriko contemplates the connection between menstruation and childbearing. She remarks: "Once you get your period, that means your body can fertilize sperm. And that means you can get pregnant. And then we get more people, thinking and eating and filling up the world. It's overwhelming. I get a little depressed just thinking about it. I'll never do it" (Kawakami, 2020, pp. 68-69). Her sense of horror at reproduction is a recurring theme that appears as a sort of counterbalance to her mother's obsessions about her own body. Makiko, her mother, toils and frets regarding ways to make herself presumably more sexually attractive to men, worrying about the best way to lighten her nipple color or the best implant methods for augmenting her breasts. Meanwhile, Midoriko increasingly rejects anything remotely related to making herself sexually attractive, mocking her mother's attempts at vanity and swearing that she will never have children of her own. In this sense, her refusal to speak has become the mark of her identity. In her diary, she notes that, in contrast to the contrived nature of social interactions with her mother and her peers, "Writing is the best. You can do it anywhere, as long as you have a pen and paper. It's free, too" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 14). Writing also permits her to, in her opinion, fashion a view of the world that is fairer than what society projects toward her. She notes the unfairness of learning about sperm before eggs, even showing an initial fascination with bearing the potential seeds of life within her. However, perhaps due to the association of eggs with her mother, she gradually develops a rejection of her own feminine identity.

This rejection of her identity hinges on her rejection of her mother and her obsession with breast implants. At one point, she confesses in her diary the extent to which she refuses to accept her mother's ideas: "It's gross, I really don't understand. It's so, so, so, so, so, so gross. So gross. I've seen what it looks like. I've seen it on TV and online. It's surgery. They cut right into you. They slit you open so they can stuff you, literally. It hurts. What's wrong with her? What the hell is wrong with her? She's being an idiot, the biggest idiot" (2020, pp. 154-155).

In this sense, Midoriko rejects the identity attached to her mother and the notion that technology might bring about some qualitative improvement in human life. Her use of the diary is precisely a turning away from technological promise. Using pen and paper, Midoriko is constituting herself in non-high-tech terms, instead turning to an ancient technique for implementing her subjectivity. This also ties into Cixous's notion that the act of writing is actively flaunting the pressures of society. In this context, Midoriko is a bold warrior who uses her silence as an act of defiance and her diary as an act of marking her own stigmata.

Furthermore, at the same time as she feels anger for existing, Midoriko feels a sense of guilt because her mother has not chosen to exist: "It's your fault for having me. I realized something after that, though. It's not her fault she was born" (Kawakami, 2020, p. 125). Nonetheless, this apparent moment of compassion is overridden by Midoriko's resentment. Midoriko is deeply unsettled by her mother's desire for breast implants, not merely because she finds the idea repulsive. She also feels that this desire is her mother rejecting her daughter's existence. As Alzate and Yoshio noted, "Midoriko sees this as a negation and rejection of her own life. Midoriko interprets her mother's desire to return to her pre-birth body as her inner wish to undo Midoriko's birth, denying and threatening her existence" (2022, p. 472). Midoriko's identity is fundamentally threatened by her mother. Her diary, which fragments the novel's narrative, ironically represents an attempt to maintain a cohesive identity for herself. Without it, she is at the mercy of a mother who does not want her and a world that wants to push all women toward motherhood, which she perceives as an empty signifier.

Later, near the end of the first part, Midoriko finally begins to speak again. She arrives at an odd sort of reencounter with her mother, stumbling and drunk, when she begins to break eggs over her own head. Now, she and her mother have come to terms with their identities, united by the eggs. Makiko seems to accept that her identity is to be a mother to her daughter. Midoriko, meanwhile, accepts that she is her mother's daughter, no matter what the circumstances. In a sense, their dual crises of identity appear to have been resolved.

V. Conclusion

Natsuko, Makiko, and Midoriko are all facets of the same identity. Makiko represents motherhood, even though she seems to have abandoned her role as a mother. Midoriko exemplifies a frustrated daughterhood, representing a pessimistic future in light of her mother's wishes to live a life unfettered by her motherhood. Natsuko represents modern womanhood, with its increased consciousness about the roles she has been dealt by society. Together, these women navigate a complex social and technological reality that attempts to shape their identity as women. On the one hand, their social world places numerous pressures and expectations on them. On the other hand, they react to these pressures through their behaviors. Natsuko manages to do this through her contemplation, thinking, and writing. Makiko reacts through her desire to "game" the system through technological intervention, such as breast enhancement or chemical nipple peeling. Midoriko reacts through her refusal to speak and her adherence to the written word.

To an extent, *Breasts and Eggs* can be read as a result of applying concepts of postmodern feminism to the project of female identity construction. However, just as Hekman (2000) noted the limitations of a Butlerian feminist project, Kawakami similarly proposes that an idealistic building of feminine identity, in reality, is much more complex than in theory. It might be true that, as many feminist theorists have postulated, an immense degree of female identity is the result of social construction. As such a line of thinking implies, many of these constructions are relatively devoid of substantial meaning. Nonetheless, as Hekman (2000) also asserted, constructing from this void is untenable. Ultimately, women such as Natsuko, Makiko, and Midoriko came to the same conclusion. They needed to grasp something much more tangible and less fictitious to sustain themselves in an often-confusing world. For all of them, this entailed embracing a fundamental part of their biological reality: motherhood. Meanwhile, their inscription in the form of writing, diary-keeping, and body modification mark their stigmata as women who are determined to take the reins of their lives, no matter how tenuous their identities. Alzate and Yoshio (2022) read the ending of the novel as both leaving the reader "with still more questions than answers" (2022, p. 469) and providing "hope for a feminist future, one that is more just, where bodies are supported and free" (2022, p. 482). To this end, the novel's final image, in which Natsuko has chosen motherhood, is paradoxical and enigmatic. In the end, the narrator's struggle to make sense of her identity from the unending pieces of the world that come hurtling at her is reduced to the most simple, dangerous, and necessary act of humanity: childbirth. With the birth of a daughter, Natsuko continues the cycle of constructing a feminine identity and life.

References

[1] Auestad, R. (2016). Invoking affect in Kawakami Mieko's Chihi to Ran (Breasts and Eggs, 2008): Higuchi ichiyô, Playful words and ludic gestures." *Japan Forum*, *28*(4), 530–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1189448.

[2] Alzate, J. (2020). Embodiment and its violence in Kawakami Mieko's Chichi to Ran: Menstruation, beauty ideals, and mothering." *Japanese Language and Literature*, *54*(2), 515–49, https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2020.96.

[3] Alzate, J, and Yoshio, H. (2022). Reimagining the past, present, and the future of reproductive bodies in contemporary Japanese women's fiction: Mieko Kawakami's and Sayaka Murata's." In B. Widmaier, and C. Lazzari, (Eds.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Reproductive Justice and Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan. 465-86.

[4] Cixous, H. (2005). *Stigmata: escaping texts*. Routledge.

[5] Gagné, N. (2010). The Business of leisure, the leisure of business: Rethinking hegemonic masculinity through gendered service in Tokyo hostess clubs." *Asian Anthropology*, *9*(1), 29–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478x.2010.10552594.

[6] Gieske, S. (2000). The Ideal couple. In L. Schiebinger (ed.). *Feminism and the Body*. Oxford University Press, 375-96.

[7] Gillis, S. (2007). Feminist criticism and technologies of the body. In G. Plain (ed.). *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, 322–35, ttps://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139167314.021.

[8] Hartley, B. (2016). Feminism and Japanese literature. In R. Hutchinson and L. Morton (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese Literature*, Routledge, 82-94.

[9] Hekman, S. (2020). Beyond identity: Feminism, identity and identity politics. *Feminist Theory*, *1*(13), 289–308, https://doi.org/10.1177/14647000022229245.

[10] Kawakami, M. (2020). *Breasts and eggs*. E-book ed., Europa Editions.

[11] Shalini, M. & Aruna, M. (2022). Female embodiment: Narrating gender/Narrating body in Mieko Kawakami's breasts and eggs." *Contemporary Literary Review India*, *9*(2), 19-35.

Nadia Mohammad is currently a senior lecturer in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Wayne State University (WSU) in Detroit, Michigan. Prior to that, she worked as a senior lecturer at the Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan and at the University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan. Nadia obtained her Ph.D. in English Literature from WSU in 2019. She is especially interested in nineteenth-century British literature, women's literature, and Victorian literature. Her personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects.