The Invisible Bluestocking

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The soft-spoken artist Naganuma Chieko did not record many of her own thoughts during her lifetime, and her existence would have been forgotten entirely had it not been for her husband, Takamura Kōtarō, and her acquaintance, Hiratsuka Raichō, who immortalized her in their well-known writings. Naganuma was a graduate of the Japan Women’s University in Tokyo and later became a member of the well-known group, the Seitōsha, or the Bluestockings of Japan. She designed and drew the cover for the inaugural issue of the Seitō magazine, first published in September of 1911 (Fig. 1). The first edition of this all-women literary magazine featured creative stories, translations of foreign texts, and a commanding manifesto on Japanese feminism. The cover shows a stylized woman with a pronounced Western nose that is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian royalty. The figure floats above a geometric, art-nouveau pattern and is flanked by the Chinese characters for “blue” and “stocking” read from right to left. Only one Japanese scholar, Nakashima Miyuki, has analyzed this captivating cover art so far—she claims that the woman evokes imagery similar to Ophelia, but instead of being belittled and weakened by the water, this woman is empowered by nature and stands as a figure to be revered. Although Nakashima does connect the image to natural elements, I expand her theory by decoding Naganuma Chieko’s beliefs about women, nature, and the past by evaluating the writings of her Seitōsha sister, Hiratsuka Raichō, and Naganuma’s poet husband, Takamura Kōtarō. I assert that through the style and iconography of the cover, Naganuma Chieko simultaneously hearkens back to both the ancient Japanese and Western nature-centric cultures in order to reclaim female creativity and embody sexual empowerment, effectively advancing the burgeoning cause of feminism in late-Meiji era Japan.

Seitō blossomed during a period of radical change in Japan. In 1868, the Meiji Restoration drastically changed the political and social environment for both men and women. The isolationist policy that had been enacted in 1633 was dismantled, and Western influence started pouring into the homogenous country. Industrialization expanded, a cabinet and judiciary branch of government were established, and a constitution was written, making Japan more comparable to Western countries. Enlightenment thinking brought about laws that made primary and secondary education mandatory and created new educational opportunities for women. By 1899, all prefectures were required to have at least one girls’ high school, and women’s colleges began to be established. However, the sole purpose of women’s education was to create virtuous mothers who were equipped to
raise well-rounded boys. The Cult of Happy Motherhood that plagued Europe during the eighteenth century had finally arrived in Japan, and progressive women began yearning for a place in the public sphere.

While there were educational advances for women in this westernizing society, in the 1890s, many began to turn back to Japanese tradition and passed laws that were based on the old-fashioned cultural norms of Japan. For example, in 1900, under Article 5 of the Police Security Regulations, women were disallowed from joining political organizations or attending political meetings because those activities were thought to be detrimental to women’s virtue. By 1900, the Western culture that had previously saturated the country competed with Japanese tradition for prominence in society. It was during this period of opposition between cultures that the Seitōsha attended women’s universities and began working on the Seitō magazine.

The “Seitō” moniker and magazine itself were first proposed by Ikuta Chōkō, the man responsible for forming the women’s literary group, the Keishuu Literary Society—a precursor to the Seitōsha. He encouraged one member, a unique woman named Hiratsuka Raichō, to collect and publish the works of women writers, many of whom began writing while in the Keishuu Literary Society. Hiratsuka drafted a statement of purpose for the magazine that called for women to develop their literary talents for the “furtherance of women’s thought, art, and moral cultivation.” This powerful declaration guided and directed the influential magazine during the first few years of publication. The journal was given the name “Seitō”—a direct translation of “blue stockings.” They decided to look to the European Bluestockings from the eighteenth century for inspiration. In encyclopedias and history books, the title of “Bluestocking” was originally translated into the “Party of the Blue Tabi Socks.” Ikuta decided that to rename the group and use the traditional Chinese characters for “blue” and “stocking” would be more authoritative and relevant to their society. In doing so, they successfully appropriated a Western idea into the traditional Japanese writing style.

On June 11, 1911, the original Seitō staff members, Hiratsuka Raichō, Yasumochi Yoshiko, Mozume Kazuko, Kiuchi Teiko, and Nakano Hatsuko met together for the first time. These women were able to create a magazine thanks to the evolution of publication culture at this time; many printing companies began producing new journals to target newly educated women. They labored over editing and publishing details, brainstormed names of other women they planned to recruit, and decided who the artist for the cover art should be. Hiratsuka Raichō, the powerful leader of the Seitōsha, says in her autobiography that Naganuma was her first choice since at the time, she was studying oil painting at the Pacific Painting Research Institute that specialized in Western style art.

Hiratsuka met Naganuma when they became tennis partners while studying at the Japan Women’s University. Hiratsuka said that she “was shy and withdrawn, too timid to look anyone in the face, her voice barely audible.” She also noted that “the collar of her kimono was daringly pulled back and the hem was trailing, and her loose hair flopped over her forehead. Stranger still was her languorous walk, at once demure and seductive. Even as a student she [had] been eccentric...” Her quiet demeanor contrasted with her loud actions, like her avant-garde fashion sense and brashness in art. For example, during her artistic training, Naganuma’s teacher pointed out the overabundance of an unpleasant avocado shade in her work. As soon as the teacher left, Naganuma proceeded to splash more globs of green onto her canvas in a hasty act of defiance. So, although she did not speak out very often, she often defied stereotypes and made rebellious
statements through her actions and her art. Hiratsuka remembered Naganuma’s unique character from college and asked her to illustrate the cover of the inaugural issue of Seitō—Naganuma accepted and drew a cover that encapsulated the spirit of the Seitōsha.

Hiratsuka Raichō published her essay, “In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun,” also called the “Seitō Manifesto,” in the first issue of the magazine. This work illustrates some of the beliefs that she and Naganuma may have shared—beliefs that influenced Naganuma when she drew the cover for the Seitō magazine. Woman’s connection to nature is seen in Hiratsuka’s essay and Naganuma’s exquisite cover. In her own words, Hiratsuka says that the Manifesto advocates that “before anything else, women must achieve an understanding of themselves as human beings and as individuals. They must also experience a sweeping, self-liberating spiritual revolution.”

In the inaugural issue of the magazine, Hiratsuka and other writers like the famous poet Yosano Akiko used nature imagery to talk about the feminine creativity they wished to reclaim.

Similarly, Naganuma’s cover does not use any overtly political iconography, but rather points to a woman in tune with nature as the source of inner strength. In the artwork, the woman stalwartly gazes upward and stands tall, confident, and dominant. The natural and curvaceous body is the source of her womanly strength. The figure is laid out on a geometric, yet still organic, pattern with ambiguous shapes that are meant to evoke sun rays and bubbles. Her loosely braided hair is more in tune with nature than the traditional updo that was fashionable in Japan at the time. Just as Naganuma’s “floppy” hair was considered a declaration of independence, the cover girl’s hair also makes a statement of uniqueness and freedom from social constraints. The prevalent theme of nature empowers the woman’s body and raises her to the status of a goddess.

The idea of womanhood’s connection to a natural element as seen in Naganuma’s art is also connected to Hiratsuka’s ideas about the sun. Hiratsuka compares woman’s inner strength to the sun and famously says, “In the beginning, Woman was truly the Sun. An authentic person. Now, Woman is the Moon. Living off another, reflecting another’s brilliance, she is the moon whose face is sickly and wan.” Many authors including Ikuta Chōkō and her Seitōsha sister, Yosano Akiko, compared women to the moon, but Hiratsuka reverses the traditional yin-yang imagery and says that women should be compared to the more masculine sun. She claims that women were originally the sun whose light was dulled to the brightness of the moon because of society. Additionally, Hiratsuka connects the sun to hidden genius and spirituality in her writing and expounds further by connecting these notions with the natural world. She says, “Ah, hidden Genius! It is the embryo of the wisdom of Nature at the center of the flames burning deep within us. It is the child of omniscient and omnipotent nature.” Here, Hiratsuka pronounces that genius is the product of nature that burns within and must be released in a spiritual revitalization that occurs in the life of women. Hiratsuka dreamed of a society where humans and nature were unified; this idea undoubtedly stemmed from her beliefs in Zen Buddhism.

Her Buddhist beliefs and the blatant allusion to the Rising Sun of Japan draws upon Japanese tradition, which also appears in Naganuma’s cover. Hiratsuka’s bold claim, “In the beginning, Woman was truly the Sun,” alludes to women’s previous literary successes in ancient times. The most famous Japanese writer in history was a woman: Murasaki Shikibu, the author of The Tale of Genji. Murasaki worked during the beginning of the eleventh century when female writers were quite successful. At the beginning of the Edo period in the seventeenth century, however, women writers were much less prominent.
until the Meiji Restoration. Hiratsuka Raichō feels the need to reignite women’s “sun” or literary creative genius and hearken back to ancient Japan to do so. Naganuma reiterates the focus on ancient Japan by drawing attention to the characters in her illustrated cover, which stand out and make up approximately a third of the picture plane. The character that was chosen to represent “stocking” (SocketAddress) is actually an outdated version of the modern character for “sock” (SocketAddress). The character’s prominence on the cover brings attention to the image of ancient Japan that is represented by the archaic symbol.

Additionally, Hiratsuka’s sun imagery that Naganuma depicts in her artwork alludes to the most popular deity of Japanese religion: Amaterasu, the sun goddess. Born to the gods of the Japanese creation myth, Izanami and Izanagi, Amaterasu became the most important god in the Japanese canon because of her posterity; all the emperors of Japan are said to be descendants of this goddess. Hiratsuka says that in ancient times, women were more clearly tied to the power of the sun, and her blatant intimation of this female power is seen in the cover’s zig-zagging lines that resemble light rays emanating from the woman’s body. The Seitōsha hoped to encourage women to reclaim the fiery and sacred creative potential that had been connected to their gender in the past. Hiratsuka’s essay and Naganuma’s cover both connote Japanese traditions such as women writers from classical Japan and the female sun goddess Amaterasu.

Hiratsuka Raichō also connects the concepts of nature, the sun, spirituality, and womanhood and concludes her essay with the following poignant quote:

“We must constantly continue our spiritual concentration and ardent prayer. Hence, we must spare no effort! Until the day on which our hidden Genius is born, until the day our veiled Sun shall shine... On that day, as supreme rulers of our own existence, we will stand at the very heart of Nature. Self-aware and self-reliant, we will have no need to question ourselves, for we will be authentic people... No longer will Woman be the Moon. On that day, Woman will once again become the sun of ancient times. An authentic person. And so, we shall rule the great, dazzling gold palace atop the crystal mountain in the east of the Land of the Rising Sun.”

Hiratsuka notes that Naganuma’s cover perfectly encapsulated the Seitōsha creed and that “for its time, the picture was daring and certain to awaken the aspirations of young women.” Naganuma’s and Hiratsuka’s similar ideologies about women and nature both clearly demonstrate the Seitō Manifesto’s intention. Naganuma’s and Hiratsuka’s similar ideologies about women and nature both clearly demonstrate the Seitō Manifesto’s intention. Naganuma’s artwork served as the poster of late-Meiji feminism and helped to disseminate the image of a powerful woman.

Naganuma’s husband, Takamura Kōtarō, wrote poems about her that give us insight into her personality and into Naganuma and Takamura’s shared perceptions about the world and womanhood. Takamura himself was highly influenced by Western thought. He started out as a sculptor, studying at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music before travelling to New York City, London, and finally Paris in 1906 where he tried to make a living. He met Naganuma in 1912 after she had already graduated from the Japan Women’s University, joined the Seitōsha, and illustrated the cover for the Seitō magazine. They were married in 1913 with a reception held in a Western restaurant.

Naganuma and Takamura did not shy away from Western culture despite multitudes of citizens who were returning to Japanese tradition. After their wedding, Takamura began to focus on poetry and adopted a Western style—his verses were more prose-like. His poems did not adhere to the strict syllabic rules of traditional Japanese tankas and
His Western training influenced Naganuma as she produced art in her personal studio in their home. This foreign influence is seen in the art nouveau style that she employed in her drawing. The geometric forms and organic shapes closely resemble the stylized forms in art nouveau postcards by Japanese artists from the same time (Fig. 2, Fig. 3, and Fig. 4). This new style was drastically different from the flat ukiyo-e prints that Japan was known for. The art nouveau style that started permeating the Japanese art world at this time was one of the results of the westernization of Japan that affected Naganuma Chieko and her husband.

Takamura Kōtarō’s tender poems about his beloved wife and their open-minded, Western marriage are what have brought him lasting fame. His marriage philosophy found in the Chieko Poems is vital to understanding the relationship between him and Naganuma. Although some scholars argue that Takamura was actually a vain, obsessive husband who crushed his wife’s ambition and slowly pushed her to insanity, the scholars like Kanai Mieko who proposed these outdated claims from the 1990s did not have as thorough of an understanding of mental disease and the hereditary nature of schizophrenia that Naganuma was diagnosed with in 1931. Naganuma and Takamura’s relationship was based on mutual respect and equality—central tenets of marriage to both of them. His poems, collectively called The Chieko Poems, showcase their progressive marriage and Naganuma’s pure demeanor; in turn, these ideas went on to influence the Seitō cover.

Even though the Chieko Poems were written after Naganuma had already illustrated the artwork for the cover of the Seitō magazine, these poems documenting the relationship between her and her husband provide valuable insight into her convictions regarding marriage and womanhood, especially woman’s connection to nature. Takamura admired Walt Whitman and frequently blended Whitman’s poetry with Japanese Buddhist views, portraying nature as the ultimate backdrop for spiritual experiences. In his poem called “One Evening,” he claimed that their love-based marriage “obey[ed] the laws of nature.” Since Naganuma was raised in the rural Fukushima prefecture, Takamura frequently wrote about her as a savior figure that drew power from nature. For example, in his poem titled “Fear” from 1912, he says, “You’re that round moon perspiring in the blue-black sky, / a moon that leads the world to dream.” Naganuma herself probably concurred with Takamura’s perception that she often felt one with nature. She refers to nature in her cover with her art-nouveau inspired organic elements and by depicting the woman as a natural, fertility goddess who is comfortable with her sexuality.

The confident sexuality of the female figure also concurs with Takamura and Naganuma’s attitudes of sex positivity. This mindset is apparent in Takamura’s poems about his wife. “Adoration of Love” from February 1914 and “Sexual Passion” from August of 1914, both provide a sultry, euphemistic description of their physical relationship. The open sexuality seen in these poems also stress the importance of the body, which was an essential focus for early feminists. The male writers like Takamura who were a part of the Naturalist writing movement that was popular from 1900 to 1910 in Japan were authentic and real in their descriptions of their sexual experiences. On the other hand, women were not as free to detail their sexual awakening or bodily exploration in confessional novels as the men did, so Naganuma’s cover art was shocking to the public. Naganuma’s rendering of the woman’s body is compelling and robust, taking up a majority of the picture plane. The fulcrum of the work is her solid, fertile frame. Her curvy body is accentuated with the wavy lines on her garment and her flowing...
hair. The themes of a love for the Western style and marriage philosophy, admiration of nature and the body, and sex positivity seen in the stylized drawing plainly demonstrate Takamura's and Naganuma's views on marriage and womanhood. Naganuma did not often speak out in word, but she spoke with her actions—marrying Takamura enabled her thoughts to be heard for all those who complained about her mousy, soft voice.

Although Naganuma Chieko’s illustrated cover for the inaugural issue of the Seitō magazine is an emphatic feminist war cry, her quiet career is often ignored. By reading the works of her husband, Takamura Kōtarō, and her Seitōsha friend, Hiratsuka Raichō, we can see Naganuma’s ideology regarding womanhood. Hiratsuka’s writings show us that perhaps Naganuma associated woman with nature, the sun, genius, and spirituality. Takamura’s poems show us that Naganuma believed in social equality in marriage and held a connection to the West and to nature. Western and Japanese interpretations of nature’s connection to woman’s spirituality and physical body are seen in the cover for the inaugural issue of the Seitō magazine. Naganuma believed in turning back to past cultures like pre-Meiji era Japan and Western antiquity to get to the root of society: nature. The connection between nature, these cultures, and womanhood are all palpable in Naganuma’s organic cover art.

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Figure 1: Naganuma Chieko, Seitō cover, 1911.

Figure 2: A Japanese, art-nouveau postcard from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Ichijō Narumi, Woman Seated in Water (1906).
Figure 3: A Japanese, art-nouveau postcard from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Hashiguchi Gōyō, The Rabbit in the Moon (Late Meiji era).

Figure 4: A Japanese, art-nouveau postcard from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Yamamura Kōka, Love Letter (1906).
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