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**Rape as a Life-Ending Experience:
Lifeblood and *A Tale for the Time Being***

When discussing the female experience using a feminist lens, one rarely fails to mention the topic of rape. Under an oppressive, patriarchal system, rape is regularly used against women as a means of control and domination. In the United States, 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 6 adult women in total have fallen victim to attempted or completed rape (“Victims of Sexual Violence”). It is no surprise that literature written by and for women often include rape sequences, perhaps as a way to unpack a sort of collective trauma. Victim narratives have been present in women’s literature as long as woman-oriented writing has existed. In Japan, this means the Meiji era (late 1860’s - early 1910’s), with the rise of prominent women’s novelists like Higuchi Ichiyō or Mizuno Senko and women’s literature magazines like *Seitō* (Bluestocking). *Lifeblood*, a publication in *Seitō* by author Tamura Toshiko, in particular, deals with the psychological dealings of a woman after being raped by a male partner. Writings about sexual violence are not exclusive to eras past, however; the patriarchy persists to the current day and so do rape narratives, as a consequence. The Canadian-Japanese author Ruth Ozeki’s 2013 novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* contains a prominent rape scene of a main character in her middle school, for instance. Although written 100 years apart, *Lifeblood* and *A Tale for the Time Being* utilize similar imagery in their attempts to detail how rape affects girls and women while under a patriarchal system. Through symbolism of gore and death, both Tamura and Ozeki argue that rape is not only a

life-*altering* experience, but it is also life-*ending* in its own regard. Upon being raped, particularly when a girl or woman lives in conditions that prevent rehabilitation, her life ends, and she becomes someone different.

In Tamura Toshiko's *Lifeblood*, the reader is introduced to the main character, Yuuko after being raped. The rape itself was never illustrated, as Tamura's goal was not to display the violence within the action of rape itself, but the violent psychological damage that rape has on victims. Yuuko first appears on the veranda off of an inn; her partner (and rapist), Akiji, is inside. She sits beside a fishbowl and the smell of fish assails her nostrils, the scent of a man, she announces. She is reminded of the evening prior and she lashes out, taking one of the goldfish from the bowl and killing it with a hairpin. Tamura describes, "The goldfish's eye was no larger than a sesame seed. Taking careful aim, Yuuko jabbed her pin into it. The fish's tail flapped violently against her wrist. Drops of raw-smelling water splashed onto her pale blue-gray sash. She thrust the pin all the way through the goldfish, piercing the tip of her forefinger" (349). The killing of the goldfish mimics Yuuko's rape, or even the killing of Yuuko in a sense. Tamura's careful use of vocabulary creates double entendre, a word or phrase that conveys two meanings. Words like "raw" and "thrust", in particular, parallel both sexual activity and erratic, violent behavior.

Furthermore, Tamura draws a comparison between death and sex, arguing that Yuuko's sexual encounter killed off a part of her. This is supported by Yuuko's own beliefs, that she is defiled, never to return to her former self. Her new self is one of sadness and suffering, Tamura explains, "Surely her crying would never cease. Indeed, if the tears stopped flowing, wouldn't her breathing come to a halt as well?" (350). This

passage demonstrates Yuuko's belief that she has *become* her pain. If she was to stop crying, to recover from the hurt she experienced, her existence would cease. Yuuko believes that her being is nothing more than the pain she experiences. Rape, Tamura argues through Yuuko, strips a victim of their quintessence, or *lifeblood*, in essence, killing them.

This argument is reinforced at the end of the publication, when Yuuko thinks she sees a bat in a theatre. Yuuko immediately draws a comparison between the bat and a fish, like from earlier in the text, "There, on one of the rear panels, she spied something moving. It was black and resembled the tailfin of a large fish" (Tamura 356). This indicates to the reader that like the fish from earlier, the bat will serve as a literary element to connect back to Yuuko's experience with rape. Indeed, it does. At the very end of the story, Yuuko remembers the bat, thinking, "*The bat is sucking the lifeblood out of that poor girl dressed in men's satin trousers. Sucking the very life out of her....*" (Tamura 357). Here, Tamura clarifies that the bat serves as a literary device representing the action of rape itself. Like Yuuko's rape, the bat sucks the life out of an innocent girl. The life that once filled Yuuko is now gone, and she has been killed, figuratively. This effect is compounded by Tamura's usage of grotesque imagery, using blood and bats (an animal commonly associated with death), to illustrate the severe emotional conditions that a rape victim must live under after rape.

This violent, death-filled imagery is not exclusive to *Lifeblood* when discussing rape. Ruth Ozeki, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, also chooses to write using this symbolism when detailing the attempted rape of her main character Nao, who experiences attempted rape by a group of students in her middle school. After the

students flee the bathroom from all of Nao's bleeding, Nao asks the reader, "Do you remember what it feels like to be a little kid playing dead?". She continues, "Your enemy is watching you die, so you make it good, groaning and clutching at your bleeding heart..." (Ozeki 277). Here, the connection between rape and death and war is drawn. Ozeki uses rich language, "groaning and clutching", and paints the image of blood draining from a body in pain, similar to the image of the bat illustrated by Tamura in *Lifeblood*. Furthermore, Ozeki juxtaposes imagery of war and childhood, creating an uncomfortable reminder for the reader of Nao's youth despite having experienced such painful events.

Following the attempted rape, Nao becomes fixated on the bidding on her underwear. She stops going to school, spending time at internet cafés watching the auction. She monitors the price at home whenever she can get her father away from the computer. Nao's pain from her experience with rape (along with the other *ijime*) consumes her and her time, just as it did with Yuuko in *Lifeblood*. Granted, Nao's suffering comes across much different than Yuuko's. In *Lifeblood*, Yuuko's pain is bold, characterized by repeated breakdowns and an anxious overtone. Tamura uses bright colors (particularly red and white) to detail the rage that Yuuko experiences. The story itself is a narrative purely about Yuuko's response to rape. *A Tale for the Time Being*, however, is not *about* Nao's experience with rape. Rape is an event that nearly happens to Nao, which significantly alters her being, but is ultimately integrated into a larger narrative.

Unlike Yuuko, Nao is rather emotionless until triggered by events reminding her of the rape attempt. She is even apathetic to her father's suicide attempt, appearing

calm and collected seeing her father's motionless body. Nevertheless, she becomes angry and vomits upon realizing someone has won the auction, and she breaks down in Akihabara when witnessing a bug fight, which functions as a parallel to Nao's attempted rape. Ozeki crafts the insect fight to mirror the rape scene against Nao. She writes,

The pale scorpion used its pincers to flip the staghorn beetle into the air. The beetle reared up and fell over on his back, exposing his underside... In the small, bare terrarium, he had no place to hide. His spindly legs writhed and flailed in the air, until they didn't anymore. *It looks like Staghorn Beetle is the loser; yes, he's dying, he's dying, he's... DEAD!* (291)

Here, Ozeki uses the scorpion to represent the students and the staghorn beetle as Nao. The scorpion flips the staghorn beetle over, like Nao was pinned to the floor. The underside of the beetle is exposed, just like Nao's underwear was exposed and taken from her. The terrarium with nowhere to hide is like the bathroom. Finally, the legs of the beetle ceasing motion is similar to how the students tied up Nao's legs, to prevent her from kicking. Ozeki is clearly arguing that Nao *is* the beetle. Furthermore, the exclamation of death by the announcer parrots the death imagery that Nao writes about after the students leave. As the dead beetle represents Nao, Ozeki is arguing that a part of Nao is dead too. Nao's overwhelming sadness is not just from witnessing the fight, but the situation of reliving a scenario where humans watch the pain of others for enjoyment, just as Nao's rape was recorded and sold for profit.

A last, vital difference between the works is that of *who* the rapists are. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, the violators are predominantly female with the help of one male character. While the perpetrators were not adult men, Nao is still victim to a patriarchal system that is pervasive within the world of the novel. As aforementioned, Nao's underwear is sold on a fetish website for pedophilic older men. This is clear to the reader, as the bidder who wins the auction uses the screenname "lolicom73", a direct reference to "lolicon", erotic content of prepubescent girls (essentially child porn). Nao's pain from her attempted rape is quite literally exploited. In her journal, Nao also makes many references to *otaku* men while at her time at the maid café she frequents. One of whom, she is set up on a date with (while she is still very well underage), and gets violent with her. As a young girl, her sexual encounters have all been unwanted and for the enjoyment of men significantly older than her—even if it is indirect, as in the auction of her underwear. In *Lifeblood*, alternatively, Yuuko's rapist is male and also her romantic partner. This makes for a more direct commentary about the ubiquitous nature of patriarchy, which extends into even the personal lives of women in the safety of their closest relationships.

Most unfortunately for these two characters, perhaps, is the lack of support they receive in their universes. Sadly, representative of the conditions many survivors live under in the real world. In the world of *Lifeblood*, early 1910's Japan, women were expected to be subservient to men in their sexual lives—thus the necessity for radical feminist magazines such as *Seitou*—sexual trauma existing as simply a part of marriage. Support for survivors of marital rape was likely very slim; just as many survivors suffered alone, so did Yuuko in *Lifeblood*. The only other prominent character in her

world was her partner—her rapist. 100 years later, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Nao too, suffers alone. Her school is filled with the perpetrators and bullies, including her homeroom substitute. She comes home to an emotionally unavailable father and a mother who blames her for being bullied. Babette essentially sells her off to pedophilic older men. Her only support is a great-grandmother who lives far off into the mountains, available only through text, though Nao does not want to worry her.

Despite the 100-year gap between these two works of Japanese women's literature—*Lifeblood* and *A Tale for the Time Being*, it is clear that the circumstances surrounding rape for women in Japan is hardly different. Even the literary devices authors use to describe the sexual violence their characters experience persists. Both Ruth Ozeki and Tamura Toshiko, female authors of different eras, rely on gruesome, severe imagery to illustrate, not only rape itself, but also the violent conditions that victims live under after rape. Above all, both authors make clear of the ever-pervasive patriarchy that exists in all realms of female existence and critical of the unwanted, male-centric sexual encounters that women and girls often experience.

Works Cited

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