

No Sex and the Paradise City

A critical reading of Murata Sayaka's *Shōmetsu sekai* 消滅世界 (2015)

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Murata Sayaka is a controversial story writer who questions Japanese current values of love, sex, and the nuclear family, pivoting on issues like gender and power. In her novel *Shōmetsu sekai* (Dwindling World, 2015), she depicts a parallel Japan where sex has disappeared, and modern birth control technology is used by the population. Thus, the novel has been labelled as dystopic, and Murata's readers think of her literary world as disturbing. In the *Shōmetsu sekai* scenario, gender-based social differences disappear for the community wellbeing, and the new biotechnology is used to improve social conditions. Therefore, should it be considered simply a dystopian work of fiction? By approaching the text from the perspective of gender, feminist and posthuman studies, and contextualizing it within Japanese society and Murata Sayaka's literary framework, I argue that it is possible to consider *Shōmetsu sekai* as an example of utopic feminist (or LGBTQ+) work of fiction and that the neutralisation of sex as we know it today should be intended as a means of social improvement.

Keywords: Murata Sayaka, Contemporary Japanese Women's Writing, Posthuman Convergences, Reproduction Technology, *Shōmetsu sekai*, *Konbini ningen*, *Seimei shiki*, *Seiketsuna kekkon*

Communication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies
(Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 1991: 164)

1. Introduction

A girl named Amane is bullied by her classmates when they discover that she was conceived by her parents having sexual intercourse. This was considered incestuous, although they were neither siblings nor relatives: they were just a married couple, but a married couple in the novel *Shōmetsu sekai* ("Dwindling World", 2015) by Murata Sayaka (b. 1979), a speculative fiction set in near-future Japan where sex had disappeared and "humans are the only animals that reproduce through scientific

coupling” (Murata 2015: 13).¹ As a consequence of World War II, a high percentage of the male population had died, and the birth rate had significantly dropped. Men dispatched for war began to donate semen which their wives used to become pregnant in their absence, thus giving birth to their offspring. Assisted reproductive technology (ART) studies were then implemented, and from postwar onwards, pregnancies by artificial insemination exceeded the number of natural pregnancies, which along with sex, disappeared completely, as new birth control technologies were being implanted in the uterus after the first menstruation – hence, women had complete control of their reproduction.

Murata Sayaka has been defined as “formidable” and “frightening, merciless and disgusting” (Fujita 2013: 278) for the excessive crudeness in her description of certain scenes, for her strange plots and ambiguous characters. She was nicknamed “Crazy Sayaka” by her colleagues Nishi Kanako (b. 1977), Katō Chie (b. 1982), and Asai Ryō (n. 1989). In her works of fiction, mainly set in a future or parallel Japan, she repositions female subjects and all subjects belonging to social minorities, from the periphery to the centre of a post dialectic, posthuman universe and questions Japanese current values of love and family addressing issues such as gender and power. In an article published in *The New York Times* in 2019, she declared that she often imagines a future where sex does not exist. Indeed, the absence of sex is one of the main *topoi* on which her narrative is based.

Many people seem to think this is weird, but for me, it's a world that feels wonderfully nostalgic [...].

‘Sayaka, you're so young, that's why you're writing this stuff. Once you experience true ecstasy, we're sure you'll stop writing this kind of story. You're still young and ignorant’, a couple of Japanese women said to me in exasperation. Both of them were in their late 50s.

‘It's appealing. You're writing this kind of story, but what will you do if sex really does disappear from this world?’. This was from a man. I've also had people say to me: ‘You're writing these things because you're bitter about the world, aren't you?’. Or, ‘Did something happen to you when you were little?’.

That's when I understood. Many people, in many ways, were scared. They wanted to be reassured, and so insisted on having stories they could understand about things that were impossible to understand. (Murata 2019b)

¹ All translations from Japanese and other languages are mine unless otherwise stated. This paper is written in British English, as well my translations from other languages. However, there are some references written in American English, which I couldn't change due to copyright. Here the italics is mine and stresses the use of *katakana* in the original.

For all her unusual stories where the absence of sex is a recurring theme, it is evident that Murata Sayaka is not bitter about the world, neither did anything strange happen to her when she was a child. Born in the Chiba prefecture at the end of the Seventies, she is rather the portrait of a generation that had grown up during the Eighties and Nineties – that is, during the Bubble Era and its collapse, when media dictated images of beautiful, perfect women who still had to adhere to standardised gender norms and roles and ‘a lot of girls were into “bodycon”² (Murata 2017) – who voiced her fantasies through the creative process of writing, offering figures of hybrid characters that blur categorisation, and function as new models for women living in the present day.

After winning the 155th Akutagawa Prize with the bestseller *Konbini ningen* (*Convenience Store Woman*, 2016) – which, translated into more than ten languages, soon gained international attention and was nominated one of the best books of 2018 by *The New Yorker* – in 2016 Murata Sayaka shot to the top of the Japanese literary scene, and listed as one of the “women of the year” by Vogue Japan.³ One of the reasons of *Convenience Store Woman*’s success can be identified in its *sui generis* setting: despite the almost linear plot, centred around the everyday life of a thirty-six-year-old clerk named Keiko who has never felt the need of, nor had, any sexual experience, the story is set in one of the many convenience stores which constellate Japan, a place immediately familiar to the reader. Moreover, the fact that Murata Sayaka herself had worked part-time in a convenience store was well known and a curiosity that had attracted the interest of critics, often more than the actual novel (which represents a critical commentary on Japanese society and gender roles).⁴ Yet, beyond the pleasant smiling face used for customers, there is an impressive world of shocking stories dealing with young girls at their coming-of-age or adult women facing problems related to their identities, sex and sexuality, loneliness and marginalisation, discomfort with the concept of womanhood and the inability to adapt to gender roles

² The *wasei eigo* (Japanese-language expression based on English words) term “bodycon” refers to a young women’s subculture emerged between late 1980s and the first half of 1990s. The main feature of this subculture was wearing one-piece clothes that fit perfectly to the body, so as to emphasize its silhouette (‘body-conscious’ dresses). For further information Japanese fashion styles in the postwar period and the ‘bodycon’ subculture see Narumi (2010).

³ The news is available at the URL <https://www.vogue.co.jp/woty/2016/winners/> (2019-12-10).

⁴ In particular, *Convenience Store Woman* “highlighted to international audiences the intersections of gender and precarity in Japanese working cultures” (Coates *et al* 2020: 5); Saitō Minako cites *Convenience Store Woman* as an example of new *labour novels* (*rōdō shōsetsu*) emerged during the 2010s alongside with Oyamada Hiroko’s *Kōjō* (*The Factory*, 2013), Masuda Aoko’s *Sutakkingu kanō* (*Stacking Possibility*, 2016) – just to mention a few (Saitō 2018: 226-29). For further information on *Convenience Store Woman* and its implication with precariat and gender issues see also Iida (2019), Specchio (2018a: 98; 2018b) and Scrolavezza (2018).

imposed by society – that is, young or adult women whose feelings can be summarised by the Japanese term *iwakan* (Miyachi and Murata 2011; Ichikawa 2011; Kurihara 2013; Enami 2013; Iida 2019).

However, the sense of *iwakan* which most of Murata Sayaka’s characters feel towards their bodies and identities is not perceived in Sakaguchi Amane, *Shōmetsu sekai*’s protagonist. On the contrary, Amane feels more inappropriate for having been generated by normal sexual intercourse in a world where social norms as we know them today had been dismantled and sex for reproductive purposes had disappeared. As she starts questioning current society values, she and her second husband decide to take up residence in the experimental city of Chiba where a new high-tech society system called Eden controls every aspect of the social, individual, and reproductive life of its inhabitants in a similar way to a totalitarian regime. For this reason, *Shōmetsu sekai* has been labelled by Japanese critics as a dystopian novel (Itō 2015; Sakuma 2016); in particular, Saitō Minako quotes it as an example of a reproductive dystopian novel (Saitō 2018: 255), a subgenre of dystopian novels emerged in Japan during the last decade as a consequence of the traumatic experience of the 3/11 – decade that she defines as “the era of the dystopian novel” (2018: 222).

In my opinion, however, the vision of society that emerges in *Shōmetsu sekai* should not be interpreted as merely dystopian. Conscious of the narrow and permeable boundary existing between dystopia and utopia, I assume that “even if technological imagination plays a role in all the dystopian visions, dystopian visions are not about technology at all, but about the use of technology. [...] Dystopia is not about technology, but just like utopia, about the human condition” (Heller and Mazzeo 2019: 47).

By analysing the use of contraceptives and ARTs as well as the structure of the Eden System through the perspectives of posthuman and feminist studies, and contextualising the work within current Japanese society and the framework of Murata Sayaka’s literary oeuvre, I aim to illustrate how *Shōmetsu sekai* can and should be interpreted as an example of feminist SF utopia, or since it also depicts a gender-free space (The Eden City), a queer or LGBTQ+ SF utopia.

In my PhD dissertation, written in 2018 and discussed in 2019 (Specchio 2019)⁵, which represents the starting point of this *on-going* research, I argued that Murata Sayaka’s intent as she depicts near future societies is to free people, women in particular, from contemporary gender role based norms in Japanese society – and that in order to do so she make use of artificial reproduction technology and other technologies. In a 2019 article, Iida Yūko discusses the gender queer elements in Murata Sayaka’s works and expresses a point of view similar to mine. In particular, she points out that “in the works which portrait near future societies, are depicted worlds where gender roles, from sexual activity to

⁵ Unpublished work.

reproduction, have been reconfigured and destroyed, and there are gender-free places where the identity of ‘humans’ has been dismantled. Future worlds which resonate with the term gender queer as sharp aggression against norms and the creation of alternatives” (Iida 2019: 50). This statement is, of course, applicable also to *Shōmetsu sekai*.

As I shall explain, sex in *Shōmetsu sekai* is being neutralised not only as reproductive sexual intercourse (sex as a *sexual act* has been “neutralised”, that is “abolished”) but more importantly, also as the source of gender-based differences in society (sex as *gender*; in this case, I mean that biological sex has been “neutralised” as it has ceased to have any effect on society).

2. It’s a sexless world

I wrote earlier that *Shōmetsu sekai* is speculative fiction set in a near-future Japan where sex has been neutralised, and the human being is the only living animal that perpetuates the species through ARTs. In this paragraph, I shall try to disambiguate and contextualise the phrase ‘sex has been neutralised’ in the sense of ‘been abolished’ as a reproductive act.

In recent times, it is not uncommon to encounter the adjective “sexless” when referring to Japanese society. The 15th Japanese National Fertility Survey conducted by the Kokuritsu shakai hoshō jinkō mondai kenkyūjo (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research) on a sample group of individuals aged between 18 and 34 years, published at the end of March 2017, revealed that more than forty percent of respondents said they were still virgin and more than a fifty percent of married couples declared that they had not had sex in the previous six months.⁶ In the wide opinion of critics and scholars, the results are related to the long working hours of men and the drastic decrease in fertility rate (Allison 2013; Gotō 2015; Moriki *et al.* 2015; Aoki 2016; Yuyama and Nimura 2016; Castro-Vázquez 2017; England 2017; Manzenreiter and Holtus 2019).

I will return to the low fertility rate later, as my intention here is to focus first on what has been addressed as the cause of “sexless marriages”, that is men’s long working hours. In this regard, I agree with Tsuji Rika as she affirms that men’s libido cannot be addressed as a root cause of the sexless condition of married couples. Indeed, Tsuji points out that even if the absence of men from home may have affected the frequency of sexual activities within the couple, it has not affected the extramarital sex, which has interestingly increased between 2000 and 2012 (Tsuji 2018: 7). Rather, she argues, the

⁶ The survey is available at the URL http://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/e/doukou15/Nfs15_gaiyoEng.html (10-12-2019).

sexless condition of married couples can and should be seen as a political action women take which “resists the constructed social norms that signify women only in relation to reproduction, motherhood, and androcentric values” (Tsuji 2018: 2). Tsuji proposes a historical analysis of the discourse on gender and sexuality in Japan and asserts that

Viewed in light of Butler's account, Japanese sexless marriages can be seen as one way in which the possibilities for women in Japan might be expanded. The choice to resist having sex is becoming more available to those who feel *mendōkusai* about sexual activity. This resistance reveals gender performativity in Japan, in which institutional power privileges marriage for the sake of reproductive sex. (Tsuji 2018: 8)⁷

The longstanding issue of sex for reproduction in contemporary Japan is enrooted in the postwar period, when society first faced the problem of a declining birthrate invoking a feminist call to a society where women were not forced to but rather wanted to give birth (*umitai shakai*), preferably not bound to the nuclear family (Bullock 2010; Kano 2016 and 2020). Yet, as Kano explains, “the low birthrate since the 1980s points to a society in which many women do not feel they can or want to give birth” (Kano 2000: 34). According to Tsuji, sexless marriages should be interpreted as a consequence of Japanese government politics that encouraged married women to have babies to cope with the decreasing fertility rate – as if women were the main actors able to “‘rescue’ society on the verge of financial collapse due to depopulation” (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 48). When in 2007 the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, Yanagizawa Hakuo, defined women as “baby-making machines”, his declaration generated a backlash, as the majority of women felt (legitimately) more offended than encouraged, and even though the Japanese government proposed alternative solutions to the low birthrate problem, none of them changed women's feelings of pressure to marry and have children (Seaman 2017: 1-4).

Therefore, in this light, it can be argued that sex within marriage had already started disappearing from Japan, and it is not surprising that Murata Sayaka also deals with the subject, even though she has repeatedly affirmed that her inspiration comes from real life rather than from social issues and that a lot of her friends rarely want to have sex with their partners (Murata [2016] 2018; 2017) – probably because, borrowing Tsuji's words, they feel “*mendōkusai* about sexual activity” as they perceive it as a marital duty. As a consequence, Murata Sayaka's choice of setting *Shōmetsu sekai* in a near-future/parallel Japan where an alternative society has been developed can be interpreted as her proposal of an imaginary scheme of social improvement for women where they do not feel *iwakan*

⁷ The Japanese term *mendōkusai* translates “troublesome,” “bother,” “difficult,” “serious.”

towards the idea of growing up and having sex or becoming a woman as a gendered category in the current society.

By contrast, the only taboo in the imaginary society of *Shōmetsu sekai* is sex within marriage. When the protagonist Sakaguchi Amane discovers that she was conceived through a love affair between her mother and father, she is shocked, and not less when her mother urges her to oppose the current social norms and search for sex and love. Yet, when her classmates discover she was born from what is called an ‘incestuous relationship’ they begin bullying her:

I discovered that I was born from a rather strange method of fertilization when I was in fourth grade, during a sex education class.

As in the next day we would have sexual education class, one day my mother had shown me an old book with a yellowed cover and, with her finger pointed at the drawings, she explained me how I came out from her and my father [...].

However, the next day, during the lesson, they taught us a completely different story. They showed us a DVD that revealed the great mystery of life linked to the birth of children through the artificial insemination system. At first, I thought my mother told me a lie: the teacher couldn't have said the wrong thing. Curious, after class I tried to ask the teacher a few questions, secretly from my classmates. She was the one who told us that we could ask her anything if we didn't understand it.

But after listening to what I had to say, the teacher contracted her face in a puzzling grimace.

‘Yes, a long time ago a lot of people got pregnant like that. I'm sure your mother only wanted you to study the history and progress of science’[...].

But when during the interview my mother told the teacher that I was born after a sexual relationship, she was so amazed that she immediately talked about it with her colleagues [...].

In no time at all, my story had become public knowledge, and my classmates were bullying me with offensive words.

‘Hey, loser, you were born ‘cause your mom and dad fucked, huh? It's called incest, you know?! Ew, disgusting!’ (Murata 2015: 11-2)

The sexual act in *Shōmetsu sekai* is neutralised to the point of disappearing within marriage, in total contradiction with the social norms of contemporary Japan. In this dwindling world, all adults of whatever gender, have the right to ask for a divorce if the partner proposes sexual intercourse – Amane herself gets divorced once for this reason. However, although the sexual act is not contemplated within the family, which remains an undefiled entity, it is permitted in extramarital relations, where, thanks to the use of internal contraceptives, women avoid unwanted pregnancies. As a consequence, in

Shōmetsu sekai a sharp division can be observed between sex as an act of lust allowed only outside marriage, and reproduction only within marriage where husbands are semen donators and women conceive by ARTs (fertilisation).

The *topoi* of sexless marriage, sex as an act of pleasure and fertilisation, are not new in Murata Sayaka’s works. The first time the concept of sex as pleasure, or, using Mizuta Noriko’s words, sex as a “celebration of life” (1995: 88) appears in 2013 in her short novel *Seimeishiki* (The Ceremony of Life, recently published with other stories in a collection under the same title in 2019).

Seimeishiki is set in a near future (thirty years ahead) and depicts a Japan where, to cope simultaneously with the decreasing birth rate and issues related to food production and consumption, funerals have been replaced by a new ritual called the “Ceremony of Life”. According to custom, the flesh of the deceased is cooked by his/her next of kin and served at a banquet after which, to compensate the death of a member of society, during the ceremony men and women are called on to copulate in public to generate new lives – however, it never becomes an orgy nor acquires erotic connotation: every person chooses one partner and concludes the ritual. In this instance, it is important to notice that the sexual act is not called sex: Murata’s characters refer to it as *jusei*, *fertilisation*, a term that immediately gives a nuance of artificiality to what should be considered the carnal act par excellence:

In the last thirty years we have undergone a slow process of transfiguration. Nowadays, few say the word ‘sex’ as it has become common practice to speak of ‘fertilization’, that is, copulating for reproductive purposes only. (Murata 2019a: 12)

From the onset, Murata presents, through the words of the main character, a world where the sexual act has disappeared in favour of what seems to assume the characteristics of a sacred, constructed ritual, a sort of artificial sex. In a society called to face both food and depopulation crises, perpetuating the species becomes the priority. Although human reproduction in *Seimeishiki* is called *fertilisation*, it still takes place through the union of two people, and without the aid of ARTs – the fertilisation of the woman still depends on biological factors. Nevertheless, unlike sexual reproduction in current society, *fertilisation* is a widespread practice that occurs outside the couple and marriage, with casual partners, being in this way reallocated within a ritual that concerns the community as a whole and not the individual family.

The theme of fertilisation and sexless marriage is also developed in *Seiketsuna kekkon* (*A Clean Marriage*, 2014b), where there is a new division between sex as an act of lust and sex for reproductive purposes, respectively outside and inside the institution of marriage. *A Clean Marriage* narrates the story

of a man and a woman who, despite having decided to pursue an unusual *modus vivendi*, banning sex from their lives, are willing to have children to create a family:

My husband wanted to ban all sex from our home. That was fine by me.

‘As far as I’m concerned, sex is an act you indulge in alone in your own room, or deal with outside.[...] I want to be able to turn my sexual desires on and off when I please, and to keep the switch off at home.’

‘That’s precisely what I think. I’m relieved to know I’m not the only one who’s abnormal.’

And so from the start ours was a completely sexless and sex-free marriage, but somewhat inconveniently we both wanted children. (Murata 2014b: 12)

The couple in the story believe that sex is an unclean and biased act, banned in the home; a mere “medical treatment” (Murata 2014b: 13) for the sole purpose of having children – therefore they undergo the *Clean Breeder*⁸ procedure which is not an assisted reproduction technique but consists in stimulating the male genital organ through external aid and “connecting” the two partners immediately before the ejaculation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, in *Shōmetsu sekai* – which follows these two short stories – sex as a reproductive act is being neutralised permanently from the world. By stating that “Love and sexual desire are, certainly, something like excrements to be evacuated outside the home” (Murata 2015: 86), Sakaguchi Amane seems to reconfirm the idea of sex as an impurity.

With this background, it can be argued that sex in Murata Sayaka’s works appears hostile, uncomfortable, refractory, and as Enami reminds us, unlike the sex described in the works of Yamada Eimi or Matsuura Rieko, to mention just two of the writers Murata Sayaka affirms to have been influenced by,

the sex described by Murata Sayaka does not produce in its readers even a little of the sensuality, dependence, attraction and obscenity possessed by the word *eros*. (Enami 2013: 166; emphasis mine)

Murata’s *eros* is a sort of “aseptic sexuality”, totally unrelated to carnal pleasures and passion; this is probably the reason why some readers got scared when they read *Shōmetsu sekai*. In my opinion, however, as sex, intended as the sexual act, remains in the extramarital domain, when Murata Sayaka asserts that she frequently imagines a future with no sex, she intends a future where sex is not bound

⁸ In the note at the translation, Ginny Tapley Takemori explains that: “Actually, the original was ‘Clean Breed’, but I preferred to avoid what I felt could, for native English ears, have unintentional echoes of birth selection” (<https://granta.com/a-clean-marriage/>; 2019-12-10).

to reproduction and women are free to choose whether to have children or not by removing their contraceptive devices. Therefore, the use of birth control technology in this novel, should not be interpreted as dystopian.

There are, however, another two aspects of *Shōmetsu sekai* which still may be considered as “scaring” as they dismantle the androcentric heteronormative Japanese society as we know it today. The first is related to sexual intercourse, as people in the parallel world of *Shōmetsu sekai* can have sexual relations with men, women, or objects; the second is related to the issue of the low fertility rate and the neutralisation of sex as a root of differences (that is, *sex* as *gender*) which I have already mentioned. In the next paragraph, I shall examine the first, arguing how the “aseptic sexuality” of the protagonists affects the sphere of intimacy and affectivity.

3. Posthuman affectivity

In the last chapter of his *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature*, John Whittier Treat cites the popular belief that

From the rewriting of its wartime history as make-believe to the notion that Japanese men have sexual relationships with computer games, life-sized dolls, or even just *dakimakura* (love pillows) [...], Japan is a wonderland of stories with little relationship to lived experience [...]. (2018: 277)

What is interesting in this conviction, is that it mentions Japanese *men* but not Japanese *women*, as if sexual relations with something *other* than a human being were the prerogative of men, and that the *other* should be identified with gendered objects, as though sexual orientation and sexual preferences were fixed and associated with a specific gender. Yet, thanks to gender studies we are now aware that gender should not be intended as solely binary or inherent to biological sex (my reference here goes primarily to Donna Haraway's cyborg able to blur any dichotomy and deconstruct gender essentialism, 1991: 150; then to Butler's theory of performativity that challenges the concept of gender as natural, 1990), and that we should not intend sexuality as an immutable attribute of the person (Vincent 2016: 69; Lunsing 2016: 9). For as Rosi Braidotti states “sexuality may be caught in the sex-gender binary but is not reducible to it [...]. As a life force, sexuality provides a nonessentialist ontological structure for the organization of human affectivity and desire” (2017a: 36). At the same time, the posthuman turn, after the recent interconnections established between human life and machines (Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013), replaces subjects in a post-dialectical discourse which reorganises the ultimate shape of

everybody and everything in a new mimetic ontology that has changed and is still changing our relation to others.

Concerning such reassessments, Murata Sayaka subverts what Judith Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” (1990: 35) of present time society, that is, the invisible norm which defines every-one/thing as heterosexual and cisgender until differently proved and explains that our assumptions are made on what we see, and places her protagonists in a reality where they can recognise new standards of gender intelligibility as well as new objects of desire other than *men* (intended here as an adult, heterosexual male human being recognised by anthropocentrism as “the humanistic measure of all things”; Braidotti, 2017a: 26). In her first short novel collection *Junyū* (*Breastfeeding*, 2003), both in the story that gives the name to the collection and in *Koibito* (*The Lover*), there are two teenager protagonists (both women) who seem to release their sexual impulses exclusively on objects

which have been previously torn away from the presumed superiority given by being men.
(Enami 2013: 167)

The first is a twenty-eight-year-old professor, hired as a private teacher, whom the protagonists think of as “*mukishitsu*” (*inorganic*; Murata [2003] 2010: 40; even if he is still a man, he is deprived of his subjectivity and agency, and is rather represented as an object), the latter is a soft toy cat – the *Koibito* of the title (intentionally written in *katakana*). The affection of the two protagonists eventually results in sexuality that deviates from the norm and may be interpreted as the result of their *iwakan* towards their changing bodies as young women and the idea that in the future they might both become wives and mothers embodying a model of femininity uncongenial to them. Or, borrowing Takii’s words, it can be argued that

Sympathising with partners who do not let their sexuality be perceived, it is as if the protagonists refuse to be women in the flesh. (2010: 230).

This is undoubtedly because the stories are both set in present-day Japan where the ‘heterosexual matrix’ is the norm and love affairs are supposed to be between human beings.

Despite this, in *Seiketsuna kekkon*, written ten years later, Murata introduces a protagonist who takes for granted that a partner does not have to be a man or even a human being:

‘Sexual orientation is becoming much more diverse,’ she went on. ‘Is a man attracted to young girls going to get an erection with his thirty-five-year-old wife? Can a woman who only gets aroused by two-dimensional men have sex with a living three-dimensional man without pain? Nowadays, your partner is not necessarily a sex object – this is a wonderful advancement. It means you can choose to have a family by rational means, thinking with your head, not with your loins.’ (Murata 2014b: 14).

Although in *A Clean Marriage* sexual relations with objects or two-dimensional characters are acceptable, Murata Sayaka fails to provide concrete examples of relationships between human and posthuman characters, in my opinion, that true “wonderful advancement” only arrives with *Shōmetsu sekai*, where the author eliminates every distinction between human/posthuman partners and reality/fiction and describes human/posthuman relations. In the near future where the story is set, not only has sex disappeared from the world (for the human species), but affectivity has changed and all kinds of relationships are possible, creating what Rosi Braidotti defines as a “transversal alliance between humans and other species” (2017a: 33). As a lived experience, regardless of gender.

One may fall in love with characters in *anime*, *manga* and books, or with people, but it’s basically the same. (Murata 2015: 13; emphasis mine).

The main character Sakaguchi Amane reports that during primary school most of her classmates were in love with boys or girls in *anime* or *manga* and that she was no exception. Her first love is an anime character called Lapis who looks like a fourteen-year-old boy but who is a seven thousand-year-old immortal alien. The first time Amane masturbates, she does it thinking about Lapis and, as far she is concerned, she thinks she is having sex with him, feeling happy at the idea he cannot touch her body (Murata 2015: 18). Moreover, as the story develops, Amane becomes friends with Mizuuchi, a middle-school classmate who is also in love with Lapis and makes no effort to deny his feelings. Love and affectivity in *Shōmetsu sekai* are thus dislocated from the embodied person and can be addressed to everything in the world, even fictional characters. When Amane finds out that Mizuuchi is in love with Lapis, she feels neither jealousy nor hostility; rather, she is amazed to the point that she establishes a ‘threesome relationship’ with both Mizuuchi and Lapis, creating a new type of relationship which involves three different persons of three different genders and sexual orientations: a biologically female person loving a two-dimensional male-looking character, a biologically male person loving the same two-dimensional male-looking character and a male-looking two-dimensional character who is

never depicted as sexualised or having sexual desire. They never have a proper threesome sexual act,⁹ although Amane and Mizuuchi try to unite their genitals and masturbate together thinking about Lapis.

Consequently, not only affectivity becomes disconnected from organic life and involves two-dimensional characters and objects, but it also has a strong impact on society. Amane starts thinking about creating a family with some-one/thing who/that is not human (Murata 2015: 21), and she can do it because, since the only social taboo is sex within marriage, its coordinates are dictated by new cardinal points that allow her to look in a different direction, not characterised by the “heterosexual matrix” – although she eventually becomes able to love humans, a surprise also for her friends (Murata 2015: 122).

4. Beyond gender is the new Eden

As I explained in the second paragraph, sexless marriages are related to the increasing low birthrate and the subsequent aging population (Allison 2013; Castro-Vázquez 2017; Seaman 2017). Even if Tsuji underlines that the sexless condition of married couples should be seen as a political action women take against androcentrism and gender imbalances, Castro-Vázquez reminds us that

the script that identifies reproduction and childcare as women’s main ‘duty in life’ remains heavily entrenched in Japanese society. [...] Women are therefore paradoxically often depicted as the main actors, who could be directly ‘responsible’ for the economic and population conundrum by postponing or neglecting marriage and childbearing. Needless to say, under present circumstances the relevance of any technology that could help boost the chances of impregnation appears undeniable. (Castro-Vázquez 2017: 48)

On the grounds of this assumption, it is not surprising that in recent years several works of fiction focused on these topics have been and continue to be published: *Akagami* (The Red Letter Project, 2016) by Kubo Misumi, *Rirīsu* (Release, 2016) by Koyata Natsuki, two titles listed in Saitō Minako’s selection of reproductive dystopia¹⁰ subgenre emerged in the last decade alongside Murata Sayaka’s *Shōmetsu sekai*.

⁹ Three-people relations are not new in Murata Sayaka’s fictional world. In *Mausu* (Mouse/Mouth, 2014), a short novel settled in near future included in the collection *Satsujin shussan*, three young teenagers (two boys and one girl) have a love affair and they try to have a sexual relation. However, far from being a sexual act characterised by penetration and other erotic features, their sex is regulated by unusual rules and assumes the shape of a mechanical and schematic ritual.

¹⁰ The world depicted by Kubo Misumi shows some analogies with Murata’s *Shōmetsu sekai*, for within the future Japan of the novel (which is set in 2030) people who have never experienced sex can choose to participate to the so-called ‘Red Letter Project,’ a system in which the government, thanks to an advanced database, matches up men and women considered

These novels, Saitō argues, share the vision of a country where the government controls the population (Saitō 2018: 255). I would add: Kawakami Hiromi's *Ōkina tori ni sarawarenai yō* (Don't Get Carried Away by a Big Bird, 2016)¹¹ and Murata Sayaka's *Satsujin shussan* (The Birth Murder, 2014a), as they have some features in common with the above-mentioned novels. Substantially, all of these works: are set in a future or a parallel society; deal with the issue of decreasing population and propose a solution to the problem; make (different) use of reproduction technologies; are set in *semi*-totalitarian social regimes.

However, though *Satsujin shussan* presents a disturbing, frightening social regime with a new police force responsible for arresting fleeing dissidents, as occurs in other works canonised as international examples of dystopic novels such as George Orwell's *1984* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Murata Sayaka has declared that her first intent while writing the story was to create a utopian society (Sakuma and Murata 2016). As I argued in a previous publication (Specchio 2018a), *Satsujin shussan* represents an attempt to create an imaginary society where the idea of womanhood as synonymous with motherhood and gender-based social differences disappear for the sake of repopulation. In this regard, *Shōmetsu sekai*, published a year after *Satsujin shussan*, can be interpreted as a more mature and developed proposal of a post-gender society.

Alongside the dwindling metropolis of Tōkyō, where the first part of *Shōmetsu sekai* is set, Murata Sayaka flanks an innovative city which, due to the total neutralisation of sex and gender, and,

compatible and assigns them all benefits to live together and foster procreation. However, sex or coupling in *Akagami* has not disappeared: natural pregnancies are the norm, but the newborn are taken away from their families by the government to repopulate the country after the increased suicide rate, consequence of a scientific paper published in 2020. On the contrary, Koyata Natsuki's *Rirīsu* describes controlled repopulation from the point of view of a heterosexual male protagonist. In Koyata's future Japan, same-sex marriages have been regulated under the active role of a female prime minister and there are no gender-based social differences. Moreover, sperm donation is managed by a state-administrated 'spermbank' and every applicant can have a child at any time. But a revolution starts as Takinami Bona, a college student, refuses to donate his sperm and accuses the prime minister of having raped him.

¹¹ Kawakami Hiromi's *Ōkina tori ni sarawarenai yō* is another example in which the author pivots the plots on issues that arise from the fear of extinction, typical of the era of Anthropocene – which in the Japanese context the critique has also recognized as a consequence of the triple catastrophe of 11th March 2011. In the collection, Kawakami Hiromi proposes one gentle story entitled *Katami* ("Memento") which is worth mentioning. The title refers to the bones kept in memory of the deceased which symbolically serve as relics of existence. These relics are not worshipped but represent the existence of life. *Katami* is set in a distant future where the geography of the whole world has changed. Cities have been replaced by small isolated towns built around special factories that produce everything for the natural world as we know it and its inhabitants are extinct. In these factories, everything is produced: tools, houses, streets, food, plants, animals and... children. Thus, in this short novel both sex and reproduction by artificial insemination have completely disappeared from the world and the creation of new lives is completely managed by suspicious factories spread all around the globe which make use of different raw materials selected randomly to create children ex novo: "Some are made from cattle, others from whales, others from rabbit" (Kawakami 2016: 10).

subsequently, their relative power hierarchies, appears as a Paradise. It is the Experimental City built on the area of Chiba New Town, where human beings do not have hegemonic power and a new computer system called the Eden System is the motor of social evolution and human reproduction. Within this microcosm, all adults regardless of gender can become mothers thanks to artificial uteri, and children born from artificial insemination (which, outside the Experimental City of Chiba, is solely allowed for women) are entrusted to a Centre where they are raised by all the inhabitants as *kodomochan*, “little children”, similarly to what happens in *Seimeishiki* and *Satsujin shussan*. The Experimental City of Chiba is a sterile environment created for the preservation of the human species – as in the outside world, typical of the era of Anthropocene, there is a ubiquitous fear of extinction. Readers learn about the Eden System from a reporter when Amane and her husband Saku are watching television:

As you all know, there is no ‘Family System’ in the Experimental City of Chiba. In its place there is the new system studied in every psychological and biological aspect in which all adults raise children together creating new life bonds.

Every year, on 24th December, the server randomly selects a population sample for simultaneous artificial insemination. The fertilized-to-be people are monitored by the server, which for the selection considers both their state of health and the number of past pregnancies. The system controls the number of births perfectly, preventing both an excessive increase or decrease in the population.

Men are fertilized through artificial internal uteruses [...]. Expectations for next year are high, everyone is looking forward to seeing the first baby born from a man!

The children born from assisted fertilization are left in the care of the Centre, which becomes their tutor, taking care of all the food, health and clothing expenses. They are sent back to society at the age of fifteen, when they are considered adults and able to be fertilized in turn.

In this world, all adults are mothers of children. Their task is to take care of children, passing on to them the love they need.

The first children born with artificial insemination are now eight years old, and studies have shown that compared to children born within the ‘Family System’ they have received more love, are more emotionally stable and are superior both physically and intellectually. Thanks to the new system, no child will ever suffer from the loss of the family, as everyone grows up loved by all adults. If this is not the Garden of Eden! For this very reason it has been decided to name it ‘Eden System’. (Murata 2015: 11-2)

The technologically mediated microcosm of the Experimental City of Chiba represents thus a post-gendered system capable of blurring all dichotomies and allows a new assessment of values. Far from being the “monstrous world without gender” (Haraway 1991: 181) some people in present times seem to fear, it is due to the total absence of social and gender differences, and the way children are raised

by all adults, that the Experimental City of Chiba is presented as a true Paradise on Earth. However, it is not the pure and uncontaminated Biblical Eden of Christianity, a place devoid of mortality. On the contrary, Murata Sayaka's Eden is the opposite of Christian Heaven, it is a place invaded by technology that isolates and excludes its inhabitants from the rest of humanity. Here, original sin is represented by the act of having a traditional, nuclear family with natural children raised mainly by women. Inhabitants of the Experimental City of Chiba have abandoned any family aspirations and sought “a way out of the maze of dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 1991: 181), opposing the myth of the origins and becoming, according to the concept of Donna Haraway, real cyborgs – who “would not recognize the Garden of Eden” (Haraway 1991: 151) of Christianity.

In this new Paradise City, there is neither sex nor traditional mothering; yet, thanks to genetic engineering and artificial insemination, the absence of sex is compensated with a more balanced system of reproduction by which the “biblical curse imposed on Eve to bear children in pain and be the only sex able to gestate the foetus inside her womb [... is] lifted” (Ferreira 2015: 15) and men can experience what is traditionally considered the women's main physiological experience.

Murata's Eden is an experimental, state-city surrounded by a dwindling world oppressed by the effects of colonialism and imperialism, and the computer system responsible for remodelling the new society delineates a posthuman scenario where men can give birth to children by the use of internal uteri of animal origin combined with medical devices. Nevertheless, *Shōmetsu sekai* is not the first novel in which Murata Sayaka chooses to talk about artificial reproduction capable of blurring “the categorical divide between sexes” (Braidotti 2017a: 35). In the short novel *Satsujin shussan*, she depicts

a future in which the Japanese government adopts a new social system from abroad [...] which allows one person to kill any other person if s/he becomes an *umihito*, a ‘breeder’, and gives birth to ten healthy children [...]. In order to allow men to participate in the system, they are implanted artificial uteri. Thus, the “birth-murder system” guarantees equal opportunities for both women and men. (Specchio 2018: 95).

In *Shōmetsu sekai* there is no reference to murders being committed as an “award” for having become a successful *umihito*, neither is there a maximum limit of ten pregnancies per person or the social category of *umihito*. Every adult inhabitant of the Experimental City of Chiba can become a mother,

breaking the Japanese cultural construct of motherhood as inherent to women.¹² However, where in *Satsujin shussan* the choice of becoming a *umihito* depends on the individual, in *Shōmetsu sekai* the system (artificial intelligence) which administrates the city randomly selects eligible specimens, cancelling the individual self in favour of a collective self. However, as the entrance into the Experimental City of Chiba is strictly controlled and ruled by immigration procedures (these take place in Narita as if people migrating to the new Promised Land were emigrating from Japan), men entering Eden are well aware of the possibility of being chosen by the system and, as a consequence, entering the city involves signing an agreement to participate in the selection. The Experimental City of Chiba represents the constitution of a new relation of power and role organisation where the individual gender and self are annihilated for the community's sake, in a new ontology where humans are ruled by human-made machines and thus “it is not clear who makes and who is made” (Haraway 1991: 177).

Moreover, people living in this hyper-technological Garden of Eden are guaranteed equal opportunities, hence the question of taking leave from work for pregnancy or other issues bound to normative, gendered pregnancy do not represent a social problem. Accordingly, as in the Experimental City of Chiba, there is no gender dissymmetry, and any adult despite biological sex plays a productive and reproductive role. It can be argued that Murata Sayaka is suggesting that to create an ideal society it is necessary to go beyond gender-based social differences and neutralise biological determinism – thus, it can be said that Murata aims for an LGBTQ+ or gender-free race/society (Iida 2019). In this perspective, making positive use of ARTs, Murata Sayaka has successfully managed to create the technological utopian dream of the feminist scholar Shulamith Firestone, who, in her 1970 essay *The Dialectic of Sex*, advocated the use of biotechnology to suppress gender inequality in society at the root of which she saw the biological body of women, considered, in a dualistic vision of gender, as the only human being capable of reproduction – indeed, as in *Shōmetsu sekai*, womanhood is not equated to motherhood, none of the female protagonists feel *iwakan* towards being a woman. As Rosi Braidotti reminds us, Firestone promotes women's liberation to “the realisation of a new humanity technologically enhanced and freed from natural needs” (Braidotti: 2017b). Firestone and Murata share the vision of a society where women's duty to biblically procreate and educate children vanishes; they both advocate the positive use of ARTs to dismantle the nuclear family system and allow the creation of a shared society without discrimination. The main difference between the ideal society schemes

¹² It is important here to specify that in *Shōmetsu sekai* men do not even perform a surrogate maternity, as it might be argued in regards of *Satsujin shussan*. Although in *Satsujin shussan* children are then taken into a center and the adopted by other families, as long as in *Shōmetsu sekai* the ‘Family System’ has been banned and all inhabitants live together in a community, I argue it is not proper to refer to men's role as breeders as surrogate mothers.

imagined by the two lies in the fact that Firestone asked for the use of external artificial uteri for women while Murata Sayaka introduces the use of internal uteri for men.

Moreover, the scenario depicted in *Shōmetsu sekai* lays the cornerstone also for a Marxist approach to the text. Being a shared community without social or biological differences where, rather than talking about human reproduction, it would be more fitting to talk about human production, arguing that the Eden System replicates a “commodification process [... that] reduces humans to the status of manufactured and [...] technologically mediated objects” (Braidotti 2013: 106), the city is constituted as a real “*childbirth factory*” (*kodomo no seisan kōjō*, Saitō 2018: 255).

Returning to the plot of *Shōmetsu sekai*, as the protagonist Amane decides to ask for residence in the Experimental City of Chiba with her husband Saku, both are selected from the server to receive artificial insemination, and unlike Amane who has a miscarriage, Saku successfully manages to give birth to a child, becoming the first biological male mother of the community. Motherhood has been raised to a public mediatic event in Japan since the debates on depopulation gained media attention (Allison 2013; Castro-Vázquez 2017; Seaman 2017; Saitō 2018), but in the Experimental City of Chiba the issue has been extended to male pregnancies and Saku’s pregnancy is followed by millions of viewers. Husband and wife are reminiscent of two modern Adam and Eve, or techno-Adamo and techno-Eva, who, by artificial insemination and an internal artificial uterus, contribute to repopulating Japan as perfect inhabitants of the new Eden. The Experimental City of Chiba becomes, for all those who aspire to the abolition of social norms and gender binarisms, a true Paradise City that, depriving parents of the natural bond with their children and creating a new collectivity, seems to link each individual to a distant place, a universe, or universal womb.

5. Final remarks

In *Shōmetsu sekai*, Murata Sayaka postulates a near-future Japan where an alternative society has developed after the acute drop in population caused by the effects of World War II. Within this society, all women are provided with internal contraceptives and all reproduction occurs through ART, hence women have control over their bodies and pregnancies. Interestingly, the new ethic has resulted in the transformation of intimacy, eros, and reproduction politics. Moreover, the Eden System has created a community where all adults are urged to contribute to repopulation and economic growth. This reference reminds us that in actual postwar Japan, only women “were urged to perform similar roles in the service of economic growth” (Bullock 2010: 18), a tendency that, as I have demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, seems to be still well-rooted in contemporary Japanese society.

In this regard, Murata Sayaka's speculative fiction illustrates a sort of dream come true for those who aim to build a more equal society, even if that utopian dream requires intensive investment in economic, scientific, and political terms, and the loss of the self for the community.

At a certain point in the narration, the television announcer claims that future society will be similar to the micro-cosmos created in the Experimental City of Chiba:

In a not too distant future, humanity will cease to reproduce within the 'Family System' and will do so exclusively within this new 'Eden System'. (Murata 2015: 117)

Is it possible to define the Experimental City of Chiba as a 'Paradise City'? Is it desirable to imagine a future where human-technology interrelation will affect our way of conceiving relationships, both marital and parent-child, and subsequently, to consider *Shōmetsu sekai* a feminist SF utopia or LGBTQ+ utopia? Although the idea of an artificial intelligence controlled community may be frightening, because the use of technology within the Eden System had been conceived for social improvement, considering gender balance and the possibilities women have in that community, it may be argued that yes, the scenario depicted in *Shōmetsu sekai* represents innovation and a step ahead from the gendered and conservative society of today. Indeed, despite the fact that at a first glance the vision of the Eden City as a "childbirth factory" (*kodomo no seisan kōjō*, Saitō 2018: 255) might be interpreted as dystopic, and, as a consequence, one could say that it is the reason why the work cannot represent a utopia, I argue that the scenario described in *Shōmetsu sekai* is not inherently dystopic. Firstly, people asking for residence in Eden City and participating in the human (re)production project do it voluntarily. Secondly, taking into account the complexity of posthuman convergences, I would state that I do not intend that the idea of "human production" is not "frightening;" rather, I suggest that it must not be misunderstood as inhuman behaviour or a disposition. I marry Rosi Braidotti's posthuman approach to the subject, as she reminds us that posthuman convergence is a matter of complexity which consists of "and-and", not "either-or" relations, as within posthuman critical thinking two contradictory terms can be true at the same time (Braidotti 2019). As a consequence, *Shōmetsu sekai* can be interpreted as simultaneously dystopic and utopic (*ustopic*, to borrow Margaret Atwood's definition of this convergence), depending on the approach to the text: the prior does not exclude the latter. However, I advocate an analysis conducted through the lens of posthuman, feminist, and gender studies, and, in regards to the society in Eden City, I would argue that from this perspective it *does* represent 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 and allow men to actively participate in human (re)production.

Despite her novels often deal with women struggling in the current society, Murata Sayaka has never defined herself as a feminist, nevertheless, her narrative frequently develops in what might be considered utopian for most women. Indeed, I agree with Leo Lewis who states that

Murata’s writing is not overly 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 imbalance. (2018)

I have underlined that most of Murata’s works are set in the future. In his abovementioned work, Treats quotes that a recent study points out that contemporary literature is interested in the development of the future scenario of Tōkyō and mentions Takahashi Gen’ichirō and Furukawa Hideo arguing that for the first author the “future is now *sōteigai* (unforeseeable)” while for the latter it contains a representation of his daily life, and that, as a consequence, the future “is not Murakami’s ‘end of the world’ [... as] it is never really the end” (Treat 2018: 293). Including Murata Sayaka in the debate, it could be argued that future Tōkyō might be a dwindling city but full of hope. Hope for a blur in all dichotomies, a city where humans would live with technology and would recraft their ontology – as experimented in the Eden City of Chiba.¹³

Therefore this would not be a society where sex has disappeared – sex intended as the biological matrix of discrimination and sex finalised to procreation. Sex would be substituted by new politics of labour and reproduction which will influence the new values of the members of that society. It may be frightening for people who defend the androcentric power hierarchies and the heterosexual matrix rooted in Japanese society. But, at least, asexual people who have never had any sexual experience and do not feel the urge to marry, like Keiko the protagonist of *Convenience Store Woman*, will not be judged strange or eccentric and will not be required to act like a woman or perform undesired roles.

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¹³ As a possible future development of this research, I shall also include a deeper analysis of the urban spaces in this and other novels.

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