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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Co-dependency, and the Politics of Nurturance in Post-war Japan* by Amy Borovoy

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Borovoy, Amy (2005) *The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Co-dependency, and the Politics of Nurture in Post-war Japan*, University of California Press, 234 pages. ISBN 0-520-24452-4.

“Women prepare food for men, wait for them, ask them if they want a bath before they go to bed. This enables men to become pathologically dependent. Most Japanese men don’t even know where their own socks are kept.”

Infusing the above anecdote she once heard Amy Borovoy presents us with a remarkable study on feminism and family structure in Japan.

The book provides an eye-opening, heart-warming, and thought-provoking insight on the multi-faceted dilemma faced by Japanese women in their roles as wives and mothers.

Studying a group of middle-class women in weekly support meetings for families of substance abusers at the Tokyo Metropolitan Mental Health Care Center, Borovoy uses the women’s first-account narratives in relating their stories. The portrayal is more accurate and convincing as Borovoy does not hesitate to switch to Japanese to give “direct voices” to the women, and perhaps, to avoid “lost-in-translation” effects.

### **Alcoholism and Co-dependency**

Borovoy starts off by presenting a prevalent problem in the country: alcoholism.

In Japan, drinking is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Businessmen convene at bars to entertain business partners; large companies allocate funds for employees’ after-work drinking, and salaried-men are “taken care of” by young female hostesses who while flattering and flirting with them, pour a continuous flow of drinks in the evenings.

For many women, alcoholism translates to managing their drunken husbands when they reach home and restoring them to sobriety for the next day of work.

Physicians consulted for the spouses’ alcoholism simply asked the women to “manage” their husbands better, thus reinforcing that it was the women’s job to cope with their husbands’ behaviour from spilling over into public disruption.

In their attempts to cope with their husbands’ alcoholism, the women face a profound cultural dilemma: when does the nurturing behaviour expected of a good wife and mother, contribute to destructive behaviour?

### **“Good Wife, Wise Mother”**

Borovoy traces the notion of women’s role as a family nurturer to the late 19th Century. Then, the Meiji era (1868–1912) statesmen promoted the idea of the “good wife and wise mother” (*ryosai kenbo*), proclaiming the importance of the work of wives and mothers to Japan’s modernisation and nation building.

Home was construed as a microcosm of Japanese nationhood, and woman were explicitly delegated the task of creating better Japanese citizens through industriousness, home-making, and child-rearing.

In post-war Japan, home remains as a “caregiving center”.

Marriage is based on separate yet compatible spheres of labour; women managing matters within the home, and men supporting the family through work outside. The notion of love does not permeate, and sexual intimacy between spouses takes a backseat to the home

management and the provision of a warm, supportive, nurturing atmosphere for husbands and children, such as preparing snacks for a child during exams, or packing the husband's suitcase for his upcoming business trip.

Women are expected to provide total care ("services") for the husbands, meeting their every need without delay.

For wives of alcoholics, this gives rise to co-dependency problems, while maintaining their dual roles of being wives and mothers. The totalising division of labour in post-war Japan placed women fully in-charge-of the family domain, including managing their children. For many, children are their "chief claim to accomplishment in life".

Motherly nurturance naturally prodded "taking care" of their children even after they grow up. They continue their involvement in their children's lives; offering help in child-rearing and financial support.

Initially unable to overcome their feelings that motherly love should be all-encompassing, eventually some women began to reassert the essence of "a mother's love". In one story, a woman shared how she learned to detach herself from her son's problems.

In another story, a woman is considered a success as she slowly learned to say no to her husband's call to buy him liquor. She said, "I didn't get involved one tiny bit. I refused to co-operate with his drinking behaviour. I really held my own."

The key element to their success is the ability to distinguish "co-dependency" from the ideals of "nurturance, care, and service".

### **Feminism or False Consciousness?**

Borovoy also compares and contrasts the women's role in Japan and in America. "The comparison is not to hold the Japanese system as an example to emulate," she writes. "The limitations of this system are more than evident: women remain largely financially dependent on men; they often linger in unhappy marriages with little sense of choice; and it is difficult to draw the line where 'caring' and 'good service' blur into servitude, belittlement, and exploitation. Yet, within the context of marriage, Japanese nonworking women have been eligible for a remarkable degree of financial support and social validation. They have a sense of security in marriage that many American women do not share."

Most of the women were thoughtful, articulate and made strategic decisions to operate within the confines of dominant gender roles in exchange for economic stability, social standing, and empowerment.

### **Present Trend and Future Outlook**

Borovoy reports that today, there is a decline in housewives in Japan due to the increasing cost of living that pushes Japanese women into the workforce. Japanese women also look for opportunities beyond motherhood. They delay marriage, build careers, splurge on material goods, and travel.

Despite this trend, Borovoy says that the domestic ideal, particularly motherhood, continues to be compelling to many young women. The conversations she had with many young elite college women who were being groomed for upward mobility and a professional career, show that the stance of motherhood is apparently still irresistible.

While industrialisation, modernisation, and the feminist movement may change the face of modern women, the message from Japan seems to be distinctively loud and clear.

Borovoy ends the book aptly by stating that, “the women’s narratives . . . suggest that forsaking the idealization of motherhood and state support for the family, even though it may be accompanied by an opening of broader opportunities for women, will be experienced as a great loss.”

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