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A Silent Voice (Koe no Katachi): The Intersection of Gender and Disability in Japanese Society

First published as a one-shot in a popular manga magazine for teenagers, Ōmia Yoshitoki's *A Silent Voice* quickly garnered critical and audience acclaim on a global scale. Its original publication in Japan ran from August 2013 to November 2014 with its English release beginning in May of 2015 and ended May 2016. On September 17, 2016, the film adaptation of the series opened at #2 at the Japanese box office, grossing roughly \$2.8 million U.S.D. opening weekend¹. Global sales performed well, and both media forms continue to hold spots among top/best emotional manga and anime films today. Equally significant for the series' success is the fact that both the manga author and film director are women who went on to receive awards for their respectful media productions.

The series follows Ishida Shōya on his path of redemption from middle school bully to meaningful and compassionate supporter of his former victim, Nishimiya Shōko. Every moment in *A Silent Voice* is crafted with care for and awareness of the vulnerable intersection in which Nishimiya lives. In other words, many of the social situations involving Nishimiya—physically or otherwise—are intentionally written to showcase her unique

¹ Karen Ressler, *A Silent Voice Anime Film Earns 283 Million Yen in 2 Days, Ranks #2*, Anime News Network, published Sept 20, 2016, <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2016-09-20/a-silent-voice-anime-film-earns-283-million-yen-in-2-days-ranks-no.2/.106697>

sufferings. Intersectionality applied to this media property manifests itself as an explanation of the various identification factors found within Nishimiya's character, how those identities are viewed by others and by herself, and how her life is impacted by these intersecting identities. Compounding this analysis are also various character's perceptions of abjection and aiming those perceptions at Nishimiya.

Through analysis of the narrative and Nishimiya's actions and behaviors, I conclude that her torment stems not only from social stigma for her deafness, but also from her gender identity. This intersection of her identities provides the crucial and critical foundation that is needed to better grasp the unique social situations Nishimiya encounters. Her sufferings are further activated by concepts of abjection in the form of society vs self and self vs self. As her journey continues through and past the climax of the story, she begins down a new path of realizations, fortifying her mental and emotional self through a combination of self-assuredness and social support. With her intersections understood, vulnerability accepted, and abjection challenged, the end to Nishimiya's story in *A Silent Voice* is anything but quiet.

Before Nishimiya is officially transferred into the class, a snarky girl named Ueno, who considers herself friends with Ishida, makes a snide comment to him about the transfer student being a girl. The young boy does not see her point, but the readers are not lost on the judgmental gender normative behavior present in the scene. Immediately, there is a preconceived notion put upon Nishimiya because of her gender identity; she is to serve as a

conventionally 'cute' girl for the adolescent males in her class and, interpreting from Ueno's remark, a rival with her female classmates for male attention. The attention brought to Nishimiya strictly for her gender is expected, as even in adolescence, the notion of "[w]omen [being] expected to be cute"² is incredibly important in Japanese society. There will be several other instances of Nishimiya being unfairly scrutinized for her intersection of gender identity with her disability. However, this first moment of narrow-mindedness coming from her future classmates foreshadows the unsettling reality readers and viewers will watch her go through as the story continues.

When Nishimiya transfers into Ishida's sixth-grade class, she stands at the front of the room and fishes through her bag for a spiral notebook. She soon introduces herself through this notebook, flipping through a few pages to communicate with her class that she is deaf and warmly looks forward to getting to know her classmates through writing in her notebook. Panels of wide-eyed adolescents are shown in the manga while there are some gasps from other students in the film, along with Ishida's memorable remark of, "What a weirdo!"³ Not only was she profiled for her gender identity before arriving to the school, but she is also immediately subjected to being 'othered' by her classmates.

² Melanie. Belarmino and Melinda. R. Roberts, Japanese Gender Role Expectations and Attitudes: A Qualitative Analysis of Gender Inequality, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20 (7), Bridgewater State University Press, 2019, p 278.

³ Ōima Yoshitoki, Steven LeCroy, Hiroko Mizuno, Ben Aplegate, and Haruko Hashimoto "A Silent Voice", Vol 1, New York; Kondansha Comics, p 56.

Her future torment builds from there with Ishida acting as the spearhead to Nishimiya's suffering. As the new student takes her seat in front of Ishida, he thinks to himself, "You can't hear? Well...so what? It's not like that interests me or anything"⁴. His next actions contradict his thoughts when readers and viewers witness the youth roll up his paperback workbook and loudly shout through it right behind Nishimiya's ears. The following panels clearly indicate the young girl is startled, and possibly in pain from the sudden and sharp noise picked up from her hearing aids (which she is not indicated as having, as this point in the story). Nishimiya does not respond in any fashion against her classmate, and shortly after, more students start to make random noises in Nishimiya's general direction to "see how bad her hearing [is]"⁵. It is only after this depiction of multiple students mocking the disabled girl that their homeroom teacher, Takeuchi Sensei, intervenes. However, the short and ineffective lecture is only given to Ishida, who does not follow through on cultivating respect for his new classmate.

The sixth graders continue to be at odds with their new classmate, reacting awkwardly to the use of Nishimiya's communication notebook, mocking and snickering at her oral speech capabilities, blaming her for classroom distractions and disruptions. Takeuchi Sensei discourages Nishimiya from participating in lessons, as her need to write her answers slows the class down. He also sides with Ueno's complaint of spending time learning Japanese Sign Language (JSL) when an aide from the hearing classroom, Kita Sensei, admits to not

⁴ Ōima Yoshitoki, "A Silent Voice", Vol 1 p 67.

⁵ Ōima Yoshitoki, "A Silent Voice", Vol 1 p 70.

knowing JSL herself. He shames her, superseding her “peripheral”⁶ role as the “pivotal”⁷ male teacher in control of the classroom, embarrassing Kita Sensei for her supposed capabilities to perform as a proper aide for Nishimiya.

Takeuchi Sensei is never reprimanded for his discriminatory attitude towards Nishimiya. When she is left behind during a short and nearby field trip to some local gardens, the homeroom teacher puts blame on the students for not informing her they were leaving. He yells there are “No excuses!”⁸ for his adolescent student group to hide behind, acting immature in his position as a fully grown and responsible adult, and thereby furthering the divide between the classroom and Nishimiya. Takeuchi Sensei acts incredibly domineering throughout the first volume, fulfilling a typical patriarchal male role in his objectification of Nishimiya and the students at large.⁹ He laughs *with* Ishida and company in their belittlement of Nishimiya.¹⁰ As previously noted, the homeroom teacher only intervenes in the youths’ bullying when it reaches a peak. During one serious encounter, Ishida brutally removes one of Nishimiya’s hearing aids, resulting in her extreme pain, and bleeding from her ear.¹¹ Takeuchi Sensei approaches the scene as Nishimiya is being taken to the nurse’s office by a classmate and readers are morose to believe that his lecture to Ishida

⁶ Sugiyama Lebra Takie, “Japanese Women Constraint and Fulfillment”, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, p219.

⁷ Sugiyama Lebra Takie, *Ibid*

⁸ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol, 1 p 84.

⁹ Sugihara Yoko, Katsurada Emiko; “Gender-Role Personality Traits in Japanese Culture” in *Psychology of Women Quarterly*; Cambridge Univ Press; 2000; p 310-1.

¹⁰ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 1, p 102.

¹¹ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 1, p 106-7.

was to say, “don’t embarrass me”.¹² His total lack of responsibility in providing safety and a proper education for Nishimiya is horrifying. The fact that the school principal also does not intervene until the young girl is taken out of school by her mother for bullying is equally horrifying.

By the time the sixth grade story concludes, all parties involved place all the blame for bullying squarely on Ishida’s shoulders. The students are never educated about deafness or disability at large and are instead time and time again told to “deal” with Nishimiya’s difference. Instead of cultivating acceptance, Ishida, Ueno, and a few additional students ‘other’ their classmate and steal Nishimiya’s hearing aids to serve as tools for their amusement. She suffers being subjected to “enfreakment...in which the nonstandard body is exploited [and is displayed] ...for public consumption as in a freakshow”.¹³ The school faculty wash their hands of responsibility, allowing their perception of Nishimiya as abject to drive their thoughts surrounding her bullying situation. As a result, the students, too, fall victim to perceptions of abjection, believing Nishimiya to be “bringing this on herself”¹⁴ for not responding to the transgressions she faces.

All of these horrible transgressions aimed at Nishimiya could have been severely mitigated if the school and educators had been responsible in educating the students about Nishimiya’s disability. This institution, however, completely failed the youth and let her fall

¹² Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 1, p 107.

¹³ Okuyama Yoshiko, “Reframing Disability in Manga”, University of Hawaii Press, 2020, p 15.

¹⁴ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 1 p 99.

face first into torment. Societal factors are at play from two parties in this narrative: the adults failure to circumvent their predispositions about Nishimiya's disability and disabled peoples at large, and the students' preconceptions of the physical body resulting in their acute and ill-managed fear of their classmate. Both groups view Nishimiya as an *ijin* (different person), damning her to treatment "based not on the autonomy of the individual but on the membership in a family unit (the *ie*) and the social collective (the nation)".¹⁵ In other words, the school faculty and student body fail to acknowledge Nishimiya as possessing education/societal value simply for the fact that she lives an existence different from theirs and their perceptions of what is 'normal'.

The remaining six volumes and the majority of the film's run-time are dedicated to Ishida and Nishimiya reconnecting and rebuilding various relationships during their senior year of high school. Beginning with their own reconciliations, Ishida approaches Nishimiya outside of the Japanese Sign Language (JSL) club that she frequents, notably on Tuesdays. At first sight, Nishimiya bolts in the opposite direction, attempting to run and hide from her former bully. Soon enough, the two stand civilly in front of one another and Ishida returns one of her old notebooks from sixth grade that he has kept throughout the years. Following this, he showcases his proficiency in JSL, much to Nishimiya's surprise, and agrees to be friends.

¹⁵ Shawn Bender, "Robo Sapiens Japonicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation", *Social Science Japan Journal*, Vol 22, Issue 2, Summer 2019 p 331-2.

Nishimiya's response to run from Ishida does not come as a surprise, as one can reasonably deduce this is done out of fear of Ishida bullying her again. What is of note, though, is that Nishimiya does not say anything along the lines of 'I forgive you'. She does not forgive because there is nothing, in her eyes, to forgive. Nishimiya runs because she does not want to relive the past experiences shared with her bully, but upon giving Ishida a few minutes to explain his present-day motivations, she warmly accepts his actions and words as genuine. Part of this is because of her genuine shock and wonderment at Ishida's proficient use of JSL. There are only three characters who communicate with Nishimiya in JSL—her younger sister, Yuzuru, and later a returning former classmate in addition to Ishida—and the audience is led to believe that no one up until this point had gone out of their way to learn JSL to talk with the young woman.

Nishimiya was perplexed, honored, happy, and compassionate in her acceptance of Ishida's desire not only to make things right with not only his past actions toward her, but also to prove to Nishimiya that he is now a better person. However, another potential reason for her lack of hesitation in accepting Ishida was Nishimiya's abjection towards herself and her disability. Shortly before the climax of the story, readers and viewers are given a brief and solemn glimpse of what the young woman thinks of herself. During their only named date, Ishida is shown desperately attempting to make his time shopping and sight-seeing with Nishimiya as happy as possible to distract her from the devastating friendship break-ups that occurred earlier that week. Ishida constantly points to cute and interesting items, smiles,

jokes, and acts goofy to get her attention, all to limited success. Nishimiya apologizes to her date, citing that nothing good ever comes from being around her.¹⁶ She views herself as an object of abjection, much like her peers did throughout her childhood. Her sense of self-worth is non-existent. As a direct result of Nishimiya's abjection towards herself, one can look back on the reunion between her and Ishida and understand that she never utters words of forgiveness because she believes her very existence caused others to be irate with her.

Nishimiya's abject view of herself for her deafness heavily intersects with her gender identity. As a female in Japan, she is expected to act polite, compassionate and motherly, passive, submissive to male authority, and to never cause tension, only defuse it.¹⁷ Gender roles are incredibly important in Japanese culture, as evidenced in a survey conducted by Sugihara Yoko and Katsurada Emiko titled *Gender-Role Personality Traits in Japanese Culture*. In this survey, participants rated, on 7-point scale, twenty feminine, masculine, and nongender-related items used to describe personality traits. By far, the Japanese male and female participants awarded the most points to traits typically associated with the like gender; masculine traits were highly regarded for males, feminine traits for females.¹⁸

With this in mind, it is no wonder why Nishimiya carries herself the way she does in *A Silent Voice*. For all intents and purposes, she is the embodiment of Japanese female gender normative behavior. By subscribing so heavily into this social mold, Nishimiya sees

¹⁶ Ōima Yoshitoki, "A Silent Voice", Vol 5 p 154-56.

¹⁷ Sugiyama Lebra Takie, *Ibid*, p ix-x.

¹⁸ Sugihara Yoko, Katsurada Emiko; *Ibid*; p 313.

herself acting in kind with what society expects. She fails to get angry with her peers, never demanding her bullies to refrain from harming her because that would only further instigate the situation. Nishimiya remains a passive victim, embracing her gender identity and expectations as a female to its fullest. In this way, Nishimiya believes herself to be doing something *normal*; that she, behaving in kind with Japanese gender normative behavior, is achieving a sense of normalcy in her life. These behaviors offer additional insight into Nishimiya's habitual apologizing during various events throughout the series. No matter how grand or insignificant, she repeatedly signs "*sumimasen*" and "*gomennasai*" to her peers, aiming to de-escalate the issue at hand—issues that, in Nishimiya's mind, are instigated or heightened by her disability.

Further evidence of Nishimiya's self-abjection, disability, and gender intersection is witnessed during a Ferris wheel ride shared between her and Ueno. Up until this point, the only interactions Ueno has had with Nishimiya involved the mistreatment aimed at the latter. Her dislike for Nishimiya's constant apologizing has been hinted at but never revealed until this moment in the fourth volume. Ueno's behaviors are inverse to Nishimiya's with her blunt manner of speaking and brutal honesty on full display during this encounter. Ueno expresses her distaste for Nishimiya flat out, refusing to subscribe to a more diminutive way of addressing the situation. Ueno does not appreciate dancing around topics of discomfort, nor does she take well to being put in a corner of accepting or rejecting the constant apologies given by Nishimiya. Neither youth changes their tune as the scene continues;

Nishimiya replies that, “I don’t hate you [Ueno]. I hate myself”¹⁹, to which Ueno responds by slapping her across the face. Ueno completely rejects Nishimiya’s abjection and claims she hides her true feelings behind the apologies before exiting the ride.

Nishimiya’s perception of her gender identity goes beyond behaving in kind with social expectations, however. At least twice during her childhood, apparently near her school transfer, Nishimiya’s mother, Yaeko, tried to force her deaf daughter to outwardly appear as male by giving her an extremely short haircut. Yaeko was adamant about this physical change, rationalizing that Nishimiya would “be stronger, like a boy”²⁰ in some kind of reverse biblical Samson feat. She does this without regard for her daughter’s consent and sits Nishimiya in a chair at their kitchen table to cut her hair herself. In this moment, Yuzuru, Yaeko’s youngest daughter and Nishimiya’s sister, takes it upon herself to fulfill the masculine role her mother desires to protect her deaf sister.

From here, the sisters follow two clear and differing paths of outward appearance. Yuzuru keeps her short hair, wears loose-fitting clothing, and speaks in kind with Japanese male speech patterns (versus females more polite female patterns). She carries on with this ensemble throughout the series in the name of protecting her sister from supposed bullies. Yuzuru posits herself as her sister’s boyfriend at first and carries the act for some time to convey to would-be suitors—namely Ishida—that Nishimiya is off limits. In her male

¹⁹Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 4 p 79.

²⁰Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 1 p 63.

appearance and attitude, Yuzuru achieves socially provided strength her mother wished for her older sister to have. She can be crass, able to snap and push people away from Nishimiya and to exert that intense protective control over her sister because unlike her, Yuzuru will not be sneered at for acting out of line because of her outward appearance.

In her difficult intersection of gender and disability, Nishimiya's dress and behaviors are opposite from her sister's. However, within that same dejected breath exists one of elation and acceptance of the role. There is a brief and dramatic scene shared between Nishimiya and Ishida when they meet in town together. This may, at first, come off as blasé; a scene created for the sake of romance. What is noted at the beginning of their encounter easily becomes a beacon of critical interest for thoughtful readers—Nishimiya has her hair up in a ponytail. At this moment, there is no way for her to hide her remaining hearing aid. She is out on the town, willingly putting her disability on display for society to witness. The scene is equal parts empowering and simple, as Nishimiya is unafraid of rejection, content as can be with her new hairstyle. On the other hand, its impact is downplayed to the societal gender expectation of females needing to be cute.²¹ The story also turns in on itself during this scene, immediately replacing the importance of Nishimiya's cute fearlessness with a dramatic and confusing confession of love. All thoughts and mentions of this important moment in the narrative are gone after the first few pages in the following volume.

²¹ Melinda Belarmino and Melinda R. Robers, *Ibid.*

Nishimiya jumps from the balcony of her family's apartment in the climax of the story. Her suicide attempt is gut-wrenching, moving in slow motion, second by second, page by page. Ishida's rescue efforts are equally tense as consumers watch him pull Nishimiya to safety only to fall into the body of water below. He's rendered unconscious and hospitalized.

Many of the character interactions during Ishida's hospital stay are uncomfortable to witness, ranging from intense physical altercations to awkward attempts at providing advice. In the midst of it all, Nishimiya fully returns to her self-bject and apologizing habits. She also returns to writing in a notebook for communication—something that has not been seen since her sixth grade year. She meets with everyone from their fractured friend circle, pleading with them through her writings to help her “restore what I destroyed”.²² Her words are meant to encompass “destruction” beyond the results of her suicide attempt. Nishimiya, in her reply to being asked why she tried to kill herself, writes “Because I destroyed what everyone worked so hard to create”.²³ Friendships. She blames herself for destroying friendships, from sixth grade and the present day. She jumped to remove her abject self from society as a final apology for problems she believes her very existence caused.

Ishida awakes and leaves the hospital in the middle of the night. He walks to the bridge he and Nishimiya often meet at and finds her sobbing alone in the darkness. The two share tears and offer apologies that neither party accepts. Instead, Ishida confesses that he

²² Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 6 p 75.

²³ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 5 p 69.

wants Nishimiya to help him build and maintain friendships, to chat and hang out with those that are precious to them.²⁴ He says to her, “I want you to help me live.”²⁵ Nishimiya accepts.

That acceptance acts as the first step down a different path for Nishimiya. A path free from self-abjection and habitual apologies. A path toward a bright future with Nishimiya’s ambitions guiding Nishimiya’s choices. This end to the narrative provides closure to the audience in the comfort of knowing its most vulnerable and unfairly treated protagonist has finally been accepted for her difference. More importantly, Nishimiya accepts herself for her difference, acknowledges her intersecting identities, and is ready to move forward in life with friends and family that both love and rely on her. She has realized her voice and walks through the doors to her future, refusing to be silent.

²⁴ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 7 p 37.

²⁵ Ōima Yoshitoki, “A Silent Voice”, Vol 7 p 36-7.

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