# VOICES AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO NOVELS BY KAORUKO HIMENO AND AOKO MATSUDA

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While the #MeToo movement has not gained much popularity in Japan, in recent years, several individuals and organizations have spoken out against gender discrimination and gender-based violence. At the same time, literature is also a place where women address these issues. The aim of this paper is to explore feminist voices in Japanese contemporary literature vis-à-vis recent feminist movements. The first part of this paper examines recent examples of gender-based violence in Japan and the actions initiated by women in response to them. The second part focuses on two novels: *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* (*It's Because She's Stupid*, 2018) by Kaoruko Himeno, and *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* (*The Sustainable Use of Our Souls*, 2020) by Aoko Matsuda. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to explore the connection between activism and literary studies, looking at literature as a feminist act of resistance.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature, gender-based violence, feminist movements, Kaoruko Himeno, Aoko Matsuda

## 1. Introduction

Hewett and Holland (2021, 3) argue that the power of storytelling is a fundamental element of the #MeToo movement. They note that "the voicing of individual traumatic experience, shared with others who listen and support the victim" is a powerful tool in the fight to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding sexual and gender-based violence. Literature has often proved to be a powerful tool to expose and resist misogyny and has likewise become a vehicle for the emergence of #MeToo. Writing literature – both fiction and nonfiction narratives – as well as

writing about literature, share with activist work the potential to make real change in the world (Hewett and Holland 2021, 8–9).

The aim of this study is to consider how questions of feminism can be used to analyze literature, and to examine the use of literature as a feminist act of resistance and solidarity. In order to explore the possible connections between literature and activism in contemporary Japan, this paper will address the issue of gender-based violence through an interdisciplinary approach, by applying data-based research to the analysis of literary texts. The first part of this paper focuses on recent examples of gender-based violence in Japan and the actions initiated by women in response to them. The social science perspective applied in the first half of the paper is essential to understand literature and literary studies as agents of change. By exploring feminist voices in Japanese contemporary literature vis-à-vis feminist movements, this paper aims to show how literary texts – which shape our perception of the real world – can be read not only to enrich our knowledge but, most importantly, to understand and subvert hegemonic gender norms.

Since the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report was first released in 2006, Japan has often been reported as lagging behind other advanced countries when it comes to gender equality, and the numbers continue to illustrate the country's poor performance in narrowing the gender gap. Japan ranked 79th out of 115 countries in the inaugural index, but it was still 94th out of 134 countries in 2010, and 101st out of 145 countries in 2015. In 2020, it ranked 121st out of 153 countries, with a decline of 41 places compared to the 2006 report. In 2021, it ranked 120th among 156 countries, inching up one place from 121st among 153 countries in 2019, the lowest position Japan has occupied. Kano (2020, 31) has consequently noted that Japan presents a paradox, in that it is both a highly developed nation and one that continues to rank dead last among G7 countries in terms of gender equality. News outlets reported that in the 2021 gender gap report, Japan stood far behind Italy, which, at 63rd, was the next worst-ranked member of the Group of Seven industrialized countries (Kyodo News 2021). Furthermore, the media stressed that Japan's position was one rank below Angola, a country with a long history of dictatorships wherein citizens' rights are significantly restricted (Shiota 2021).

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index quantifies gender equality based on four categories: politics, the economy, education, and health. Thus, Japan's low ranking highlights the nation's lack of progress in closing the gender gap in the political and economic spheres. However, discrimination against women and gender inequality are not limited to those spheres but are, in fact, pervasive in contemporary Japanese society; sexual harassment in the workplace, the exclusion of women from medical schools, the ranking of colleges by easy sex in tabloids, and the compulsory use of makeup and high heels

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in the workplace are only some examples of how misogynistic cultural norms are preserved in Japan. Furthermore, the role of the media in reproducing systemic gender inequality cannot be underestimated. McLaren (2020) explores how the structure of misogyny perpetuates mainstream media culture as well as the male-dominated media industry in Japan. She argues that the negative representation of women reinforces the exclusion of women from power in Japanese society, thereby maintaining gendered hierarchies and preserving patriarchal norms. She also stresses that "the beneficiaries of misogynistic practices are patriarchal elites, who might currently be intent on resisting any challenge to their authority but are also anxious about the destabilization of gender norms" (McLaren 2020, 347). Recent examples of such misogynistic practices can be found in two high-profile incidents, involving former president of the Tokyo Olympics Organizing Committee Yoshiro Mori and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) secretary general Toshihiro Nikai.

As reported by both local and international media, during the Japanese Olympic Committee meeting held on February 3, 2021, committee members were discussing the issue why women are not equally represented on the boards of sports associations and committees. Speaking to members of the Japanese Olympic Committee with reporters present, Mori said that a board meeting where many women attend takes time because "when you increase the number of female executive members, if their speaking time isn't restricted to a certain extent, they have difficulty finishing, which is annoying" (Bonesteel 2021). He then continued by stressing that the women in the Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games "all know their place" (Iki, Mishima, and Ito 2021).

Mori's sexist remarks generated a wave of protests against the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee chief, as well as against misogyny in society at large. Momoko Nojo, the head of a youth group called No Youth No Japan, an organization that encourages young people's involvement in politics, started a petition calling for action against him that collected 100,000 signatures in two days (Oi 2021). At the same time, the hashtags *#WakimaenaiOnnatachi* (*#わきまえない女たち*, "women who refuse to know their place") and *#DontBeSilent* spread over social media, and on February 6, 2021, an online forum entitled "Don't be silent #WomenWhoRefuseToKnowTheirPlace" was held by the online news media group Choose Life Project (Iki, Mishima, and Ito 2021).

Although on February 5, 2021, Mori announced his resignation as president of the Tokyo Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Game, experts hesitate to consider such a move as a victory for women's rights in Japan. En-Ting has noted that "this is a problem of systemic sexism; Mori and others are enabled by an environment that tolerates blatant sexism" (quoted in Gunia 2021). It is thus unsurprising that on February 16, 2021, Toshihiro Nikai, the LDP

secretary general, announced the governing party's decision to allow five women to attend their meetings as non-speaking observers. As reported by local and international news outlets, Nikai explained that "he was aware of criticism of the male domination of the party's elected board, and it was important that female members of the party 'look' at the decision-making process" (BBC 2021). Thus, women were again accepted at meetings on the premise that they would "know their place" and stay silent.

The petition started by Momoko Nojo, as well as the hashtags *#Wakimaenai-Onnatachi* and *#DontBeSilent*, are part of a larger trend that sees women raising their voices. In 2017, the activism of Shiori Itō and the blogger Ha-Chu against sexual violence and sexual harassment marked the beginning of the #MeToo movement in Japan. In 2018, the group Voice Up Japan (VUJ) started a petition to take down an article published by the weekly magazine *Spa!*, ranking colleges based on how sexually "easy" their female students were after drinking. In 2019, the #KuToo movement started fighting against the high heel policy in workplaces. In the same year, Flower Demo, a movement to protest sex crimes and sexual violence, was initiated by feminist activists Minori Kitahara, Eiko Tabusa, and Akiko Matsuo, with monthly gatherings where participants are given the stage to speak up about their experiences of sexual assault.

At the same time, literature has also been a place for women to raise their voices against misogyny, discrimination, and violence. This paper begins with an analysis of the above-mentioned feminist movements to frame it as a continuum with the fictional world. In order to explore the relationship between feminist activism and resistance to misogyny and a culture of gender-based violence in literature, the second half of the paper focuses on the literary analysis of two novels: *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* (彼女は頭が悪いから, *It's Because She's Stupid*, 2018) by Kaoruko Himeno (姫野カオルコ, b. 1958) and *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* (持続可能な魂の利用, *The Sustainable Use of Our Souls*, 2020) by Aoko Matsuda (松田青子, b. 1979). *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* is based on an incident that happened in 2016 at the University of Tokyo, Japan's highest-ranking university, in which a male student conspired with four other men from the same university to intoxicate a female student in order to sexually assault her. In *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō*, Matsuda depicts two worlds. On the one hand, her characters struggle to survive in a misogynistic society where women are either sexual objects used to satisfy men's desires, or victims of male violence. On the other hand, she creates a world where all "middle-aged men" (*ojisan*) have disappeared, and women are finally free from their misogynistic attacks. Through an analysis of Himeno's and Matsuda's novels, I will connect these works with recent feminist movements, thereby showing how Japanese fiction both serves as a platform to voice traumatic experiences and has the potential to make real changes in society.

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## 2. From Shiori Itō to Flower Demo: A recent history of women's voices against gender-based violence in Japan

The journalist Shiori Itō is often identified as the face of the #MeToo movement in Japan. However, her fight against sexual violence started before the phrase #MeToo made its first appearance on Twitter in October 2017. On April 30, 2015, Itō filed a criminal complaint accusing Noriyuki Yamaguchi, then the Washington Bureau chief of the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), of drugging and sexually assaulting her on April 3, 2015. Although an arrest warrant for Yamaguchi was issued, it was later cancelled and on July 22, 2016, prosecutors dropped the charges against him. In light of this, Itō decided to file a petition to re-open a case against Yamaguchi and to go public with her case. On May 29, 2017, she held a public press conference at Tokyo District Court and in September 2017 she filed a lawsuit against Yamaguchi. In October 2017 she published *Burakku bokkusu* (*Black Box*), a sexual assault memoir where she reported both the incident and the experiences that followed. In 2018, her BBC documentary *Japan's Secret Shame,* directed by Erika Jenkin, was released. Both the book, which was awarded the best journalism award by the Free Press Association of Japan in 2018, and the documentary depict her "fight to be taken seriously despite systematic obstruction, threats and a nasty online backlash" (McLaren 2020, 346). Itō's fight was not only against her assaulter, but foremost against the silence – the "black box" – forced upon victims of sexual violence in Japan. She spoke up to testify that Japan's bureaucratic approach to the prosecution of sex-related crimes highlights how rape is still considered a taboo topic. She further argued that the system itself, with century-old rape laws, a lack of rape crisis centers, and the re-enactment of alleged rapes with life-size dolls,[1] discourages victims from reporting rape and assault (Coates, Fraser, and Pendleton 2020, 2).

Furthermore, Itō's story proves that the silence forced upon victims of sexual assault is the product not only of Japan's patriarchal system and its legislation, but also of the mainstream media. O'Dwyer (2020) noted that although foreign media organizations extensively covered Itō's story, mainstream Japanese media were slow to take up her case. Moreover, Yamaguchi's connections within the conservative political establishment[2] might also have polarized the response to Itō's allegations. Itō was attacked for coming forward as a victim of sexual violence

[1] The use of life-size dolls is a common practice in police investigations of sexual violence in Japan, where the alleged victims are required to lie on a mattress as a life-size doll is pushed down on them, re-enacting the attack for the police.

[2] Although Yamaguchi, friend and biographer of former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, has always denied knowledge of any moves by his political allies to protect him, suspicions remain that the decision to cancel Yamaguchi's arrest warrant despite the strong evidence the police had gathered was determined by some governmental influence.

and became a victim of backlash and a second rape. LDP politician Mio Sugita[3] and conservative manga artist Toshiko Hasumi[4] accused Itō of being responsible for what happened by getting drunk and suggested that she was trying to sleep her way into a job. In other words, as Hasunuma and Shin (2019, 104) argue:

> in addition to the legal barriers that make it so hard for women to pursue cases of sexual harassment and rape, the media attention perpetuated the narrative of sexual harassment and rape as being the victim's fault or responsibility rather than the perpetrator's.

Although Itō has become the face of Japan's #MeToo movement, #WeToo, formed by a group of Itō's friends and other allies to "promote solidarity and offer a collective voice to help victims speak up" (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, 105) gained more popularity in Japan than #MeToo, which is still considered too difficult and high-risk by many Japanese women. Nevertheless, Japan was among the top ten users of the hashtags #MeToo and the Japanese equivalent #WatashiMo (#私も, "me too") in the first weeks after actress Alyssa Milano used the phrase echoing activist Tarana Burke in October 2017. It rose to third place worldwide among nations using the hashtag after the blogger Ha-Chu accused Yuki Kishi, a prominent creative director at Japan's leading advertising agency Dentsu, of sexual harassment on December 16, 2017 (Coates, Fraser, and Pendleton 2020, 1–2). Other high-profile cases of sexual harassment include, for example, allegations of sexual harassment against the Administrative Vice Finance Minister Junichi Fukuda in 2018. On April 12, 2018, the magazine *Shukan Shinchō* published an interview with a female reporter for the broadcast network TV Asahi, in which she accuses Fukuda of sexual harassment. While Fukuda eventually resigned and had his retirement payments reduced, it should also be noted that Finance Minister Tarō Asō initially dismissed the allegations against him, hinting that Fukuda had been the victim of a "honey trap." Furthermore, Asō emphasized that sexual harassment was not, in any case, illegal in Japan, arguing that the way to stop harassment of women reporters is to replace them with men (The Japan Times 2018). As Hasunuma and Shin (2019, 103) have eloquently put it:

> Despite laws to assure the rights of women in the workplace, such as the Equal Employment and Opportunity Law of 1985, the Ministry of Labor's

[3] Itō has filed a damage suit after Sugita's Twitter account liked a number of posts that suggested that Itō was lying about being raped. It is worth noting that Sugita admitted saying that "women can lie as much as they want" about sexual violence during a closed meeting of LDP lawmakers in September 2020 (The Asahi Shimbun 2020).

[4] In November 2021, the Tokyo District Court ordered Hasumi and two other men to pay damages to Itō, recognizing that they defamed her in tweets and retweets that portrayed Itō as lying about being subjected to sexual assault (Shiota and Udagawa 2021).

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> official recognition and definition of sexual harassment as a violation in the workplace (Efron 1999) and the government's recent "womenomics" agenda to promote women's greater inclusion in the workforce, Japan has not done enough to address its procedural, legal, and governmental responsibilities in protecting women or any victims of rape or harassment. [...] Furthermore, because sexual harassment is not considered a crime in Japan, it remains a private matter, and crime statistics do not capture the full extent of sexual harassment and abuse, especially of minors (Ogasawara 2011).

As previously stated, the legal vacuum, the mainstream media's attitude toward reported cases, and the backlash both online and in print journalism cooperate in forcing victims to stay silent. It is against such a culture of misogyny that various movements have made their appearance in recent years. Voice Up Japan, #KuToo, and Flower Demo, among others, have gathered media attention for their activism both online and in the streets.

Voice Up Japan (VUJ) began in early 2019 when Kazuna Yamamoto, a student at International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, started a petition on Change.org, speaking up against the weekly magazine *Spa!*, which in its December 25, 2018 issue published an interview with Keiji Isogimi, manager of the dating site Lion Project, who ranked five universities where girls are "easy to access" for sex and described how to judge whether a woman is sexually available based on her appearance (Sugiyama 2019). The petition garnered over 40,000 signatures in four days. As a result, the magazine issued an apology and later released an article on sexual consent. Yamamoto, along with a number of fellow ICU students including Ryo Tsujioka and Asaki Takahashi, decided to create VUJ, which is now a structured organization whose mission is "to create a more gender equal society where people feel safe to voice up" (Voice Up Japan, n.d.). As Yamamoto states in her message as the founder of VUJ:

> Growing up in Japan, I struggled because I always felt like I didn't fit any "standards." I didn't fit the ideal beauty standard, my ambitions didn't fit the "female standard," and how I wanted to dress was different from what fashion magazines told me was right. My ambition was laughed at because "I'm a girl" and I don't know how many times I was told by neighbors, peers, and relatives that education shouldn't be a priority because of my gender. I used to speak what was on my mind, and was clear about what I wanted, but society taught me that raising my voice won't do any good. (Voice Up Japan, n.d.)

In other words, the *Spa!* article only triggered Yamamoto's protest, which in fact arose not from this isolated episode alone, but rather in response to the misogyny deeply rooted in Japanese culture, which teaches girls and women "to be

obedient and patient, and [...] to not question our leaders" (Voice Up Japan, n.d.). The group, which now has chapters at more than ten universities, including ICU, Aoyama Gakuin, Meiji, Keio, and Waseda, is currently working on two projects, the Anti-Discrimination Law Project and the Sexual Consent Project, while also collaborating with experts to organize different events. VUJ ICU has, for example, recently partnered with Minna no Seiri (Menstruation for Everyone), an organization that aims to reduce taxes on menstrual products (Zujeva 2021). Every Monday they publish articles related to gender issues on the "Our Voices" section of their website, and in spring 2022 they were set to release their very first magazine with articles by writers from different departments of VUJ, as well as special guest writer Yumi Ishikawa, founder of the #KuToo movement (Voice Up Japan, n.d.).

The #KuToo movement begun in January 2019 with a tweet by Yumi Ishikawa, former gravure idol and part-time worker at a funeral parlor. Having noticed that her male colleagues wore light, flat shoes, she tweeted about her frustration with the dress code, which stipulates that women have to wear high heels. The original tweet received over 67,000 likes and nearly 30,000 retweets (The Japan Times 2019a). She later created the hashtag #KuToo, a pun on the Japanese words for shoes (靴 *kutsu*) and pain (苦痛 *kutsū*) amalgamated with #MeToo. She then launched a campaign on the petition platform Change.org that collected 18,856 signatures and was presented to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, calling for a ban on dress codes that force women to wear high heels at work. While All Nippon Airways Co. and Japan Airlines Co. revised their regulations to allow their female employees to wear shoes with no heels (The Japan Times 2020), most companies where in-person customer service plays a major role still maintain dress codes which require women to wear high-heeled shoes, according to a survey by Kyodo News (Kyodo News 2019a). The importance of such a dress code was also supported by Health, Labor, and Welfare Minister Takumi Nemoto, who in response to the petition submitted by Ishikawa and the #KuToo movement replied that he would not support a drive to ban dress codes that force women to wear high heels at work, since "it's generally accepted by society that (wearing high heels) is necessary and reasonable in workplaces" (Kyodo News 2019b).

The history of the #KuToo movement shares some characteristics with Shiori Itō's fight and other feminist movements, in that it proved again how a legal vacuum, the mainstream media's attitude, and backlash, especially online, combine in forcing women into silence. In this regard, Ishikawa's activism is particularly significant, in that she addressed the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, arguing that they fill the legislative vacuum that allows misogynistic practices in terms of dress code, and later spoke up about her experiences of sexual harassment, stressing the absence of a law that recognizes it as a crime. Ishikawa has also continued to raise her voice to address and fight back against backlash both through her

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Twitter account and her activity as a writer and editor. Her book *#KuToo. Kutsu kara kangaeru honki no feminizumu* (*#KuToo. Reflections on a True Feminism Starting from the Shoes*, 2019), in particular the chapter "#KuToo *bakkurasshu jitsuroku 140ji no tatakai*" ("A True Record of the #KuToo Backlash: A Fight in 140 Characters"), is a record of her long-standing fight on Twitter against the so-called *kusoripu* (クソリプ, literally "shit reply").[5] Furthermore, Ishikawa edited the volume *Josei undō to bakkurasshu* (*Feminist Movements and the Backlash*, 2020) of the magazine *Etosetora* (*Etcetera*), where, together with Akiko Matsuo and the editorial board of etc.books, she again addressed the role of the backlash against feminist movements as a way to take away women's confidence and force them into silence, as well as the right of women to be angry and to voice that anger (Ishikawa 2020, 5).

Akiko Matsuo is another prominent figure in recent feminist movements in Japan. She is the founder of etc.books, a bookshop and publisher specializing in feminist books. Together with Minori Kitahara, writer and owner of Love Piece Club, Japan's first sex toy shop owned by a woman and catering exclusively to women, and Eiko Tabusa, a prolific author of manga, she founded Flower Demo, a movement to protest sex crimes and sexual violence. The movement started in March 2019, when several cases of sexual assault were given the verdict of "not guilty." On March 12, 2019, Yasuhiko Shiiya, a company executive accused of having sexually assaulted a 22-year-old woman who was too drunk to resist during a drinking party in 2017, was found not guilty by the Kurume branch of the Fukuoka District Court[6] which concluded that "the circumstances could have misled him into believing the victim had given her consent, as she had sometimes opened her eyes and made sounds, making her look conscious" (The Mainichi 2020). Not-guilty verdicts in other sexual assault cases followed at the Hamamatsu branch of the Shizuoka District Court, the Okazaki branch of the Nagoya District Court,[7] and the Shizuoka District Court[8] that same month. On April 11, 2019, over 500 women gathered in front of Tokyo Station to protest against unjust acquittals

[5] *Kusoripu* is a term used mainly on Twitter and Instagram to refer to unwarranted replies often based on false premises and containing defamatory content.

[6] On February 5, 2020, the Fukuoka High Court overturned the not-guilty ruling and handed a four-year sentence to Shiiya (The Mainichi 2020).

[7] On March 13, 2020, the Nagoya High Court overturned the not-guilty ruling and sentenced a 50-year-old man to 10 years in prison for raping his 19-year-old daughter in 2017 (The Japan Times 2020b).

[8] On December 22, 2020, the Tokyo High Court overturned the not-guilty ruling and handed a seven-year prison term to a father who raped his biological daughter from the age of 12 (Netsu 2020).

of sexual crimes, show support for the victims,[9] and seek changes to the law.[10] From April 2019 until March 2020, demonstrations took place in over 40 cities around Japan. The movement, which was supposed to be held until March 2020, when the members of an investigative commission to deliberate penal code revisions pertaining to sexual crimes established by the Ministry of Justice would have been announced, has in fact continued its activities, partially moving online amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women's voices have been a fundamental element of the Flower Demo movement from its inception. As stated by Minori Kitahara, one of the founders of the movement:

> Why do we feel like we have to be so cautious, be ready to defend ourselves, make sure we don't make any mistakes, be sensitive to other people's mood, and lower our voice when we are just voicing the pain we feel? I couldn't take it anymore. We don't need to stay silent anymore, we can say something is wrong when it's wrong, we want to change that atmosphere that lets people question our tone of voice and make fun of our angry voice. I talked about this with Akiko Matsuo from etc.books, and on April 4, we created a Twitter account to spread our views through social media. (Kitahara 2020, 10)

The silence forced upon women and the desire and need for them to speak out were the driving forces behind the Flower Demo movement, and certainly many women in Japan shared the same frustration and anger. The act of raising one's voice against gender-based violence was thus an essential element of the demonstrations from the outset. Since the first demonstration held in Tokyo, many participants have not only been listening to speeches by the organizers of the demonstrations, but they have actually taken the microphone and begun speaking about their own experiences of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence.[11] A section of the movement's official website is dedicated to collecting the voices of those people who could not join the demonstrations in person but who want

9 Flower Demo's organizers asked the participants to join their demonstration by bringing a flower as a symbol of #WithYou, that is to say, a symbol of solidarity with the victims (Kitahara 2020, 11).

10 The current sexual assault law, promulgated in 1907 and amended for the first time in 2017, states that "the victim must not have consented and that there be proof of the inability to resist due to physical violence or threat." Activists have demanded that the Justice Ministry introduce far heavier sentences against sex crimes. Furthermore, they asked that the current age of sexual consent be raised from 13 to 16 (Tamura 2020).

11 According to the World Health Organization, the term "sexual and other forms of gender-based violence" comprises not only rape, but also sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, forced early marriage, domestic violence, marital rape, trafficking, and female genital mutilation (World Health Organization, n.d.).

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to share their opinions on the judicial system regarding sexual violence. Some of those "voices" have been included in the volume *Furawā demo o kiroku suru* (*A Record of Flower Demo*, 2020). The importance of victim's voices within the Flower Demo movement has been often emphasized. As reported on the movement's official website:

> It became clear that it wasn't the case of victims cannot speak out [*sic*], it was the case of society not letting the victims speak. In fact, the victims have always spoken out about their struggles. However, the society who [*sic*] puts the victim and the perpetrator side by side, to judge who is lying or not, shut the victim's voice. This society did not have the ability to hear the voices of the victims. (Flower Demo, n.d.)

Flower Demo is thus not only a movement that aims to dismantle misogyny by raising the age of sexual consent, changing the current sexual assault law, and abolishing the legal clause that demands proof of the victim's inability to resist due to physical violence or threat in order to recognize the act as non-consensual (Kitahara 2020, 15). Neither is it simply a movement made of "brave victims who started to raise their voice;" it is also and foremost a "space where we are challenged to listen to the voices of victims of sexual violence" (Kitahara 2020, 16).

In this section, I introduced some recent trends in grassroots feminist movements in Japan. While tackling the issue of gender-based discrimination from different perspectives, all of the above-mentioned movements have addressed the effects that the legal vacuum regarding gender-based violence has on the lives of Japanese women, who are often forced further into silence by the male-dominated arenas of politics and the mainstream media. With this context in mind, in the following sections I will analyze the novels *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* by Kaoruko Himeno and *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* by Aoko Matsuda. I will show how these fictional works embody the need to provide victims of gender-based violence with a space where their voices can be raised and heard. Furthermore, I will argue that these literary texts can be viewed as tools for building solidarity among readers and strengthening the relationship between writers and activists.

## 3. Fiction as a space for victims' voices: *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*

Kaoruko Himeno made her fiction debut in 1990 with her comedic novel *Hito yonde Mitsuko* (*People Call Her Mitsuko*). In 1997, she published *Junan* (*The Passion*) which was shortlisted for the Naoki Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Japan. Himeno was later nominated for the same prize four more times. In 2003 with the novel *Tsu, i, ra, ku* (*F-a-l-l*), in 2005 with *Haruka eiti* (*Haruka at 80*), in 2010 with *Riaru Shinderera* (*Real Cinderella*), and in 2014 with *Shōwa no*

*inu* (*Showa Dog*) for which she was awarded the 150th Naoki Prize. Some of her works address the issue of gender and sexuality. *Junan* is the story of a Christian woman who loses her virginity with the help of a talking face that appears near her genitals. *Tsu, i, ra, ku* describes the lives of some young girls through first loves and sexual experiences. Nevertheless, it is in *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* that Himeno tackles issues related to gender-based violence for the first time. The novel is based on a real story of violence perpetrated by five male students from the University of Tokyo on a female student from a different school. Before exploring the depiction of gender-based violence in this novel, it is thus necessary to situate Himeno's novel in the context of this incident.

In April 2015, Kensuke Matsumi, Taichi Komoto, Koki Matsumoto, Ikushima Kazuki, and Fujita Tomoyuki, all students at the University of Tokyo, formed "The University of Tokyo Birthday Research Group," a social club whose goal was to intoxicate young girls with alcohol and molest them. The incident narrated in *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* happened on May 11, 2016, when the five men got their victim (A) intoxicated and assaulted her. They forced her to strip naked, groped her upper body, and forcibly kissed her while she lay on her back. They were also accused of slapping her on the back, using a hair dryer to blow hot air on her genitals, prodding her anus with disposable chopsticks, and pouring a cup of hot ramen noodles on her breasts (Murai 2016).

The victim refused Matsumi's offer of a settlement, and on September 20, 2016, the Tokyo District Court sentenced him to two years in prison. Presiding Judge Hajime Shimada ruled that Matsumi's actions were "despicable and caused unbearable suffering," but also recognized that there was room for rehabilitation considering that Matsumi had expressed remorse for his actions, apologized, and vowed to refrain from ever drinking alcohol again (Adelstein 2016). Taichi Komoto, who did not participate in the drinking party, but offered his room to his friends for the after-party and touched A's buttocks, was sentenced to one year and six months in prison. During the trial, he admitted, "I began to think that the female students at other universities were dumber (*atama ga warui*) than we were. I wanted to get them drunk so they would lower their rational hurdles and do something indecent" (The Asahi Shimbun 2016). Koki Matsumoto, the man who invited the victim to the drinking party and slapped her back with his palms, was sentenced to one year and six months in prison. While the court acknowledged that Matsumoto "took advantage of the victim's fondness for him to lure her out, and played an important role in forcing her to drink alcohol, stirring up his accomplices, and removing the victim's pants and underwear," it also recognized that there was room for rehabilitation (The Sankei News 2016). Ikushima Kazuki and Fujita Tomoyuki accepted the settlement terms from the

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victim – to withdraw from the graduate school of the University of Tokyo – and were thus not prosecuted.[12]

While the incident was widely reported in the media, it also inspired a massive backlash against the victim, who was accused of being responsible for what happened to her. As reported in an interview with Himeno, it is both because of the cruel nature of the incident and the backlash that followed it that she felt the urge to write this novel.

> When this incident was reported, I found it terribly strange. There were two women at the scene. The victim who was stripped naked was A, and the other was B. B said to the men, "Don't do this. This is a crime." Then she asked A, "Do you want to go home?" But since A didn't move, B left first. Since A didn't leave despite having been asked "Do you want to leave?" there were many opinions on the Internet like "A stayed behind by herself" and "This woman [A] is also responsible." That question, "Why did she stay?" stuck with me. I couldn't believe that there would be a woman who, after having been teased and stripped naked by some men in front of another woman, asked by that same woman "Do you want to leave?" would quickly move her body and reply "Yes, I'm leaving! Wait!"
>
> There was another reason why A was being criticized. One of the perpetrators was a man who had had sex with her, and some people said, "Then what, she had already had sex with him." I thought that A went along with the students from the University of Tokyo because there was a man with whom she had such a relationship, and that A had special feelings for him. I was curious about how she came to have a sexual relationship with him. I felt that this incident, which was unfortunate for A and shameful for the student from the University of Tokyo, had a universal background or reason, trivial and complex at the same time. I decided to write a novel about these aspects of the story. (Tōdai Shinbun Online 2019b)

Through writing her novel, Himeno tries to understand the relationship between the victim and the perpetrators, as well as the role of bystanders when sexual and gender-based violence occurs. Moreover, she addresses the problem of second rape and emphasizes how society contributes to the perpetration of violence through victim blaming. As discussed in the previous section, the backlash against the voices of victims of sexual assault who speak up is a recurrent element in recent feminist movements. We can thus assume that *Kanojo wa atama ga warui*

[12] After the trial, Matsumi, Komoto, and Matsumoto were expelled from the University of Tokyo. One of them went abroad and two have been working as engineers and consultants in Tokyo. At least one of the indicted students who dropped out of graduate school changed his name (Takahashi 2019).

*kara* is a story about the silence forced upon women, and as such it challenges readers to listen to the voices of victims of sexual violence.

The story in *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* starts in 2008, eight years before the incident took place, and it follows the female protagonist, Misaki Kandatsu, from her junior high school years through the events that will turn her into the victim of five students from the University of Tokyo: Tsubasa Takeuchi, Jōji Miura, Satoru Wakuda, Kōji Kunieda, and Teruyuki Ishii. Depicted as a young girl from a middle-class family who attends a low-ranked school in the suburbs of Yokohama, Misaki is described as a "normal girl" (Himeno 2018, 134) with normal insecurities. Aware of her low position in an academic background-oriented society, she is self-conscious, passive, in love with the idea of love but at the same time lacking in initiative. In October 2015, while a student at Mizutani Women's University,[13] Misaki meets Tsubasa, who grew up as the son of a bureaucrat in the high-class residential area of Hiroo, Tokyo, and went on to study at the University of Tokyo. The two meet one night at an Oktoberfest party in Yokohama and fall in love with each other. However, their relationship is gradually affected by Tsubasa's egotism. Tsubasa starts dating Maya Izumi, whom he considers more suitable for him in terms of education and socioeconomic status, while treating Misaki as a casual sexual partner. Misaki, who is aware of Tsubasa's feelings, is conflicted in that she wants to end the relationship with him but cannot help responding to his wishes. On a night in May 2016, Tsubasa invites Misaki to join him and his friends at a drinking party. Misaki is not aware that they are the founders of the "Constellation Study Group," an intercollegiate club whose purpose is to rank female students, intoxicate them with alcohol, make money by taking sexy pictures and videos and selling them secretly, and have physical relations with them. During the party, Tsubasa and his friends start sending messages to each other and mocking Misaki for her looks and her educational background. After Tsubasa sent them a naked picture of her, they start a drinking game forcing Misaki to answer difficult questions and take off her clothes as a penalty if she cannot answer. Afterwards, Misaki tries to go home, but Tsubasa persuades her to go to the apartment of one of his friends, where she will be later assaulted.

While the description of the incident is extremely realistic and it depicts the sexual assault in detail, the story narrated in *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* does not focus only on that violent episode, but also explores the trivial and yet complicated lives of Misaki and the men who assaulted her. The use of multiple internal focalization allows the reader to experience the story from different points of view. In this way, Himeno manages to explore the background of each character in terms of education, family, socioeconomic status, and, needless to say, gender.

[13] Mizutani Women's University (Mizutani Joshi Daigaku) is a fictitious, low-ranked university.

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This is particularly important in that the use of multiple internal focalization allows the violence in this story (as well as the violence perpetrated against A in 2016) to be understood as a result of the intersection of class and gender. By continuously shifting the internal focalization from one character to another, Himeno reveals how boys and girls internalize models of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity through the education they receive both at school and within their home environment. In other words, by focusing not only on the violent incident, but also on the lives of both the victim and the perpetrators leading up to it, Himeno explores how boys and girls are taught to behave according to the expectations of their respective roles, and how insecurities and inferiority complexes in boys can lead to violent expressions of toxic masculinity. Furthermore, by stressing the sense of superiority felt by the five students from the University of Tokyo, the most prestigious university in Japan, toward female students of lower-ranking schools, Himeno reveals how discrimination and violence cannot be fully understood if we dissociate class from gender. In this sense, it is worth recalling that both in reality and in Himeno's story, the settlement terms from the victim are that the five men voluntarily withdraw from the University of Tokyo. We can assume that she wanted them to acknowledge that the violence they perpetrated was the result not only of their misogynistic behavior, but also of discrimination based on their victims' socioeconomic status.

As stated above, after the incident was reported in the media, A became the target of a massive backlash. Himeno, aghast at the number of people who blamed A on the Internet, decided to write *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*. In the last part of the novel, Misaki is insulted over the phone and on the Internet by people who believe she ought to be held responsible for the incident and that she destroyed the lives of five promising young men. She progressively loses her voice, while the reader is forced to bear witness to other voices: the voices of the backlash. Across more than six pages, the reader is overwhelmed by the violence of the comments on the Internet:

> "Do they release your real name just for fooling around at a bar? I feel so sorry for the guys from the University of Tokyo."
>
> "That woman followed them while wagging her tail. It's like giving the green light. Why did they get arrested?"
>
> "I don't think a woman who says she had a drink and went along with them and yet didn't expect them to do something like that has the right to sue them. She should be sorry…"
>
> "A slut goes to the room of some guys she's never met before, complains to the police, and causes trouble for the students from the University of Tokyo. This woman should be tied naked to a telephone pole and publicly

> lynched. Maybe if men on the street will start pissing on her, this woman who thinks she's God's gift on earth will feel sorry."
>
> "I feel sorry for the students from the University of Tokyo, but they're too stupid even though they studied at that college. Are they all virgins? They have such a bad taste in women. They should have stuck this woman's face in the toilet from the beginning and stuffed shit in her mouth. They should have torn her spirit to shreds. Then she would have lost her words and wouldn't have been able to sue them." (Himeno 2018, 403–405)

After the incident, Misaki's voice almost disappears, covered by the noise of the violent backlash, as well as the voices of the five perpetrators and their families. Misaki is continuously referred as a "stupid woman" (*baka onna*) who believes that she is God's gift on earth (*kanchigai onna*). Kōji Kunieda's mother goes so far as to foresee that Misaki will write a book to report the sexual assault and she recommends that her son write a book entitled *Honey Trap* as a response. In other words, while the victim is punished for having spoken out and is forced into silence, her attackers are encouraged to raise their voices against the woman who ruined their bright future as alumni of the University of Tokyo.

A never wrote a book to report the abuse she endured at hands of Kensuke Matsumi, Taichi Komoto, Koki Matsumoto, Ikushima Kazuki, and Fujita Tomoyuki, nor did she become the face of the #MeToo movement in Japan. Nevertheless, her story is worth telling, and her voice is worth listening to. In light of this, *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara* demonstrates that literature, along with recent feminist movements, can provide victims of gender-based violence with a platform where their voices can be raised and heard, and contribute to raising the awareness necessary to fight against the misogyny that forces women into silence.

## 4. Strategies of resistance against silence: *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō*

Aoko Matsuda made her literary debut in 2013 with *Sutakkingu kanō* (*Stackable*), which was nominated for the Yukio Mishima Prize and the Noma Literary New Face Prize. Her collection of stories *Obachantachi ga iru tokoro* (*Where the Wild Ladies Are*, 2016) has been translated into English and included on *TIME's* list of the 100 must-read books of 2020. This collection of stories draws inspiration from traditional Japanese ghost tales and can be read as a feminist rewriting of "old stories" that, as Matsuda stated, "reflected and encouraged people to internalize misogynic views towards women" (Matsuda and Barton 2020). In her works, filled with irony and humor, she often focuses on the misogynistic elements of Japanese society. The short stories "*Misoginī kaitai shō*" ("Dissecting Misogyny: A Live Demo") and "*Onna ga shinu*" ("The Woman Dies") both included

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in the collection *Wairudo furawā no mienai ichinen* (*The Year of No Wild Flowers*, 2016), probe this matter.[14]

Matsuda is also a translator. Her translations include the feminist books *The Trouble with Women* (2016) by Jacky Fleming and *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) by Carmen Maria Machado, among others. Furthermore, she has selected the name of the feminist publisher and bookshop etc.books previously mentioned in this paper. It is thus easy to draw a line connecting her works with the most recent feminist movements in Japan. In regard to this matter, Barton (2020) argues that:

> [Matsuda's] calling, as she characterizes it, is to give a home on the page to people who have experienced marginalization, and to make them feel less alone. The most obvious form that this takes is with respect to the treatment of women: in Japan, the word "feminism" is still either wrapped in the shroud of academicism and seen as something that has no point of contact with everyday folk, or else seen as the preserve of highly strung women with a victim complex. An important part of what Matsuda does is to spell out in an accessible way the way that living in a patriarchal society impacts their lives. Even the humor and the almost cake-like enjoyability of her stories has an articulable rationale: to ensure that people actually enjoy what it is that she is doing. [...]
>
> Her prose may be deceptively delightful, but Matsuda is angry, and the solutions that her fiction envisages are not in the realm of characters who accustom themselves to difficult situations through psychological growth or suitable choices.
>
> Matsuda wants systemic change, and the feats of the imagination she conjures up should not be read purely as escapist fantasy but also a kind of training in grasping towards a better world.

Matsuda's anger at the embedded nature of sexism and misogyny in Japanese society and her desire for systemic change are also fundamental in her first full-length novel, *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō*. In this section, I will focus on the depiction of women's voices and the strategies deployed in the story to fight back against sexual harassment and to dismantle misogyny.

*Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* begins as a work of speculative fiction, describing a future Japanese society where the *ojisan* (literally, "middle-aged man") have disappeared. However, in Matsuda's novel the term *ojisan* is used to refer to

[14] Both stories have been translated into English by Polly Barton and published, respectively, online at Granta (2018) and in *Monkey. New Writing from Japan*, vol. 1 (2020). *Wairudo furawā no mienai ichinen* has recently been reprinted in paperback with the title *Onna ga shinu* (*The Woman Dies*).

any person with a misogynistic mindset and behavior, regardless of sex, gender, or age. Girls and young women used to be victims of incessant, encompassing, unwanted attention from *ojisan*. They were sexually harassed in the workplace, molested by gropers (*chikan*) on the train, or more generally subjected to the male gaze that sexualizes and objectifies women's bodies, especially when they are wrapped in school uniforms. However, young girls suddenly became invisible to *ojisan*. The girls took advantage of the situation and started making fun of *ojisan* and taking revenge on them. The situation quickly escalates and after the death of an *ojisan*, the Japanese government decided to separate the young girls' and *ojisan's* respective living spheres. The young protagonists of the parts of the story set in such a utopic future thus live in a "new" world where *ojisan* do not exist and the "old" male-dominated world has become a subject taught at school. This narrative set in the future is contrasted with the reality lived by the protagonist Keiko and other characters around her, which closely resembles Japanese society in the early 2010s.

While a large part of the story is narrated from Keiko's perspective, *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* is a polyphonic novel that allows the reader to listen to many voices. Ayumu is a woman who works in the same company as Keiko and who is tired of the unequal treatment she receives at work. Ayumu's colleague Mana experienced the objectification and oversexualization of women's bodies as a member of an idol group. Kobayashi, also Ayumu's colleague and her friend, is a young man who refuses the model of culturally privileged hegemonic masculinity embodied by the "salaryman."[15] Minor characters include young mothers dissatisfied with Japanese government policies for blaming women for the low birth rate without providing adequate, publicly-funded social care. Matsuda continuously shifts the internal focalization from one character to another. At the same time, she includes elements that closely resemble contemporary Japan. In this way, she allows readers to have a broad perspective on how gender-based discrimination and violence affect the lives of men and women within Japanese contemporary society.[16]

Through Keiko's story, Matsuda tackles the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. In *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō*, sexual harassment is depicted in a subtle way. Matsuda herself explained that she did not want to include any explicit depictions of sexual violence against women, which she considers an overused story trope[17] (Takii 2020). Keiko was harassed by a male colleague who

15 On salaryman masculinity, see, e.g., Dasgupta (2012).

16 Ozawa (2020) has pointed out that Matsuda's novel resonates with most female readers as it carefully describes the difficulties women feel in their daily lives in Japan.

17 The short story "Onna ga shinu" ("The Woman Dies") mentioned above is in fact a parody of

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intentionally showed his romantic/sexual intentions toward her in an extremely vague way, so as to give their colleagues the impression that Keiko was actually in a relationship with him. Despite Keiko's efforts to hold him accountable for his behavior, after she reported the case to their company, he was left unpunished, and she quit her job. Unemployed and wishing to distance herself from a society where she feels discriminated against as a woman, Keiko goes to visit her sister in Canada and upon her return, she is shocked by the attitude of girls in Japan. For the first time, Keiko realizes that with their "small and adorable voices that could never hurt anyone" (Matsuda 2020, 21) Japanese girls are the "weakest creatures" in the world (Matsuda 2020, 22).

While struggling to find her place in society, Keiko becomes captivated by an idol group to which the female idol "XX" belongs. This idol group fascinates Keiko through their powerful performances and songs. In their military-like uniforms, they are different from other idol groups which usually behave cutely, weakly, and submissively toward men. Nevertheless, the idol group to which "XX" belongs is produced by the same *ojisan* who created Japanese idol culture. Even though Matsuda never mentions names, a reader familiar with the Japanese context of idol culture easily recognizes that the model for "XX" is Yurina Hirate, a former member of the idol group Keyakizaka46 produced by Yasushi Akimoto, creator of top Japanese idol groups, such as Onyanko Club and AKB48. While Keiko is aware of the inherent contradiction of being a fan of an idol group that reproduces the idea of young girls as sexual objects to be consumed by male fans,[18] it is because of her "obsession" that she finds new strength within herself to endure her "weak" position within society.

After joining a live performance of the idol group created around "XX," Keiko realizes that, despite the presence of female fans, during the show she could only hear male fans singing along and calling the idols' names. She thus reaches the following conclusion: women's small voices might be a "defense wall" against the male gaze (Matsuda 2020, 111). In other words, Japanese women might have used their small voices in a strategic way in order not to be noticed (and harassed) by men. By quoting Keiko's friend Ayumu, "silence was her safety area," and she chose it after reaching the conclusion that "the chance to live safely would be higher" if she avoided expressing her thoughts out loud (Matsuda 2020, 190). Although Ayumu is aware that raising her voice can also become a strategy to keep away *ojisan*-like men, who "for some reason abhor women who are chatty, loud, and try to talk to men as an equal" (Matsuda 2020, 126), she also admits that in the end she is powerless. Keiko and Ayumu's analysis of women's voices show that while

such a story trope.

18 On the consumption of female idols by male fans, see Rosie Dent-Spargo (2017).

women in Japan are expected to know their place and silently accept the status quo, speaking up might in fact put them in danger.

However, "XX"'s performance inspires Keiko to break this silence and speak out against a society built by and for *ojisan*. "XX" and the other members of the idol group are depicted as powerful and cool, in contrast with the powerless, cute image usually attached to female idols. While they have been created and produced within a sexist system that uses young girls as disposable goods to be consumed by their male fans and that emphasizes rivalries between members of the same group, the strong bond between "XX" and her fellow members, who help each other "as though they were in a girls-only school" (Matsuda 2020, 108–109), inspires Keiko to raise her voice and join the protests in the streets of Tokyo.[19] Furthermore, "XX" and the other members of the idol group sing songs about a revolution, and while in the beginning they were just repeating some words written by the *ojisan* who produced them, they gradually come to embody the revolution itself. Their voices are not used to respond to the male fans' desire anymore, but rather to change the lives of the female fans who stayed silent for too long. As the young girls from the future explain, "We can hear their voices saying, 'We sang about revolution, we sang the revolution,' so we must have a revolution" (Matsuda 2020, 187).

Encouraged by the idol group's song, Keiko's fight transforms. While initially she was conducting an "everyday resistance" (Matsuda 2020, 102), she decides to join an overt rebellion against male-dominated society. The expression "everyday resistance" is clearly referring to James C. Scott's influential book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1985). According to Scott (1985, 137), by focusing on visible, historic "events," such as organized rebellions, we end up missing more subtle but yet powerful forms of "everyday resistance," that is, forms of cultural resistance and non-cooperation by individuals and collectives in a subordinated position who, through those practices, seek to deny the claims made by elites and the effects of domination. It is through such practices, which in Scott's (1985, 137) analyses include rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, and anonymity, that Keiko and her former colleagues manage to silently resist the misogynistic society they live in. Nevertheless, they reach the conclusion that a revolution is necessary in order to fundamentally dismantle the male-dominated culture on which modern Japan has been constructed. That a revolution is necessary in order to change the status quo is clearly stated from the very first page of this novel. It is not a coincidence that it opens with a quote from *Shōjo kakumei Utena* (*Revolutionary Girl Utena*,

[19] Even though it is not clearly explained, based on several elements, such as the location of the protest, we can assume that Keiko joined the antinuclear demonstrations that took place outside the residence of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda in Tokyo in 2012.

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1996), a famous manga and anime that tackled issues such as feminism, queerness, and the ideologies reproduced by the fairytale genre.[20]

Keiko's lonely fight against her harasser thus transforms into a revolution that will lay the foundations for an *ojisan*-free society where misogynistic behavior and sexual misconduct are no longer tolerated. In the early 2010s, when Keiko's story is set, a leak reveals Japanese politicians' plan to "shrink" the country. Since the Meiji era (1868–1912), they had been trying to shrink the population by creating a misogynistic society where women are forced to change their surname upon marriage and are confined to the private sphere of the home while financial support for pregnancy and child-rearing is insufficient. Amid protests held in the streets of Tokyo and in an effort to avoid taking responsibility for the end of Japan as a country, the Japanese government decides to make the female idol "XX" and her fellow group members the new leaders of the country and blame them for its decline. However, the newly created government is supported by the "normal office workers" (Matsuda 2020, 222) who organized the protests against the former leaders and has a plan to make Japan an *ojisan*-free country, that is to say, a society that holds accountable men and women with a misogynistic mind-set and attitude, regardless of their age. Invested with power, the idol group creates rules that make sexual violence a severely punishable crime and thus transforms Japan into a country where *ojisan* are accountable for their actions in terms of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Forced to comply with the newly-created rules, the number of *ojisan*-like people diminishes, and they eventually disappear, making Japan a "new" country where women's bodies are no longer the targets of sexually objectifying behaviors.

Constantly wary of attacks from *ojisan*-like people, Japanese women – both in Matsuda's fiction and in reality – see their souls progressively eroding. As the title of this novel implies, women need to discover a "sustainable use" for their souls, that is to say, a way to avoid the depletion of their spirit in order to maintain balance amid the male-dominated society that they live in. Through Keiko's words, Matsuda suggests that finding an *oshi* (short for *oshimen*, a member of an idol group whom one wants to support) might be a way to "sustain one's soul," that is to say, to recharge oneself and receive the energy necessary to continue resisting misogyny, gender-based discrimination, and violence. Matsuda and her literature might in fact do the same for readers. As Iwakawa (2021, 98) notes:

> Keiko bets on the possibility that the performance of "XX" and the other [members of the idol group] will change the world. I have had such experiences too with characters in animations, artists, writers, critics,

[20] On feminism and queerness in *Shōjo Kakumei Utena*, see Ikuhara and Kotani (2000).

> thinkers, translators, and many others. These are the moments when I am empowered by their resistance, and I decide to change the world.

Following Iwakawa, we can conclude that reading Matsuda's literature and listening to her characters' voices can also fuel her readers' souls and give them the energy necessary to change the world. In this sense, feminist literature and feminist activism are interrelated parts of a joint approach to fight sexual and gender-based violence, in which writers and activists can inspire and support each other.

In summary, Matsuda's novel provides the reader with several perspectives on the problems posed by the endemic misogyny of Japanese society. By switching the internal focalization from one character to another, the author tackles several issues, such as sexual harassment at work, gender-based violence toward women and young girls in particular, the objectification of female bodies through idol culture, and the lack of proper family-friendly policies. At the same time, by blending these extremely realistic elements with speculative fiction, she also suggests solutions. On the one hand, publicly-declared resistance in the form of revolution; on the other hand, "everyday resistance," that is, a reflection on "how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power" (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013, 2). While a revolution led by an idol group might sound unrealistic, "everyday resistance" offers effective ways to fight back against misogyny. Keiko and Ayumu manage to "defeat" their enemy, the man who harassed Keiko and forced her to quit her job, not through an organized revolution, but by spreading gossip about his recurrent practices of sexual harassment around the company.

We can thus read Matsuda's novel as an example of feminist activism emerging out of literature. By voicing traumatic experiences and depicting solidarity and support toward the victims, Matsuda raises awareness against misogyny and probes the effectiveness of speaking out against gender-based violence as well as the importance of creating a community where victims and bystanders can work together to achieve real change.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed recent movements and platforms where women can make themselves heard against misogyny, discrimination, and violence. While the #MeToo movement and Shiori Itō are well known both inside and outside of Japan, the fight against gender-based violence has continued with new faces, new names, and new voices.

Voice Up Japan, which started from a small university in Tokyo with a petition on Change.org against the oversexualization and objectification of women, has grown into an organization that actively fights against gender-based dis-

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crimination and works to educate people on sexual consent. Their voices have entered into International Christian University and other schools and companies that seek to cooperate in creating a society where people feel safe to speak out. In 2019, Yumi Ishikawa, the founder of #KuToo, was chosen as one of the BBC's 100 most influential women, along with Hiyori Kon, a member of the sumo club at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, who was the subject of the British documentary *Little Miss Sumo* (2018). Upon being included in this list, Ishikawa stated, "lots of people don't even realize there's gender discrimination in Japan" (The Japan Times 2019b). It is thus of absolute importance that we keep creating venues, both online and offline, were the victims of sexual violence and gender discrimination can raise their voices and force bystanders to listen to their stories. As Hewett and Holland (2021, 3) note, this is an essential element for the creation of a community that "collectively bear[s] witness to the larger problem of violence and in so doing dismantle[s] silence, shame, and stigma." Flower Demo, which has continued organizing its monthly gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, is an example of such a community and shows what we can do to avoid forgetting these stories of violence and the victims left drowning in solitude and indifference.

The potential to make substantial changes can be explored in literature too. The two novels analyzed in this chapter exemplify how literature can work on several levels in order to voice dissent against misogyny and gender-based violence. In *Kanojo wa atama ga warui kara*, Kaoruko Himeno does not simply report the incident that involved five students from the University of Tokyo assaulting A. By following the lives of the victim and her perpetrators over eight years, the author explores their backgrounds and reveals how gender, socioeconomic status, and education intersected in causing the violent attack. Furthermore, by describing the victim's life before the incident, Himeno gives her back her dignity as a person who cannot and should not be reduced to "the Tōdai students' sexual assault victim."[21]

In *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō*, Aoko Matsuda challenges her readers to think about the condition of young girls and women, as well as that of men who refute the hegemonic models of masculinity, within Japanese society. By looking at her fiction in the context of the recent feminist movements analyzed in this chapter, we can understand that Matsuda's novel is an act of protest against a society where young girls and women often choose to stay silent in order to stay safe

[21] It is worth noting that during an event held at the University of Tokyo in December 2018, Himeno's novel was criticized for its lack of realism in depicting the male students and their frustration. At the same time, it was praised for giving male readers studying at the University of Tokyo a chance to think about how they can change the image attached to their university. The event also became an opportunity to discuss sexual consent and gender-based violence on campus (see Tōdai Shinbun Online 2019a).

while facing gender discrimination and various forms of gender-based violence on a daily basis. Constantly scrutinized by the male gaze and categorized as either sexual objects or disposable goods (being female idols or employees working on a poorly paid, temporary basis), the young girls and women depicted in *Jizoku kanō na tamashii no riyō* are constantly reminded that they do not have equal rights and opportunities, and are not able to live free of violence and discrimination. Against such a male-dominated society, Matsuda imagines a revolution and invites her readers to speak up or even sing against misogyny, and in so doing helps them sustain their souls. Furthermore, she creates a utopic world where, like in Equiterra, the world imagined by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, all people, regardless of gender, have equal rights and opportunities, and women and girls feel safe. Both Equiterra and the *ojisan*-free future imagined by Matsuda exist only in our imagination, and yet they offer hope that, through everyday resistance and by raising our voices, we will be able to build them.

In this paper, I addressed the issue of gender-based violence through an interdisciplinary approach by applying data-based research to the analysis of literary texts. Such a methodological approach which connects social science, specifically research data on feminist movements, to literary studies not only allows us to understand the cultural backgrounds within which fictional works are situated, but it also opens the possibility of creating a community of readers where both victims and bystanders can share their experiences. Furthermore, it makes it possible to strengthen the relationship between writers and activists and close the gap between activists and academics. Feminist activism can benefit from such bridges, which enhance our chances of winning the ongoing fight for the elimination of gender-based violence.

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