

*La donna è mobile*  
The *Modan Gāru* as Seen in the Context  
of Modern Urban Culture

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Although playing an important economic role well before the turn of the century, Japanese women had hardly figured in public life. This changed early in the 20th century when “working women” appeared, especially in the service sector. These *shokugyō fujin*, by defying the officially propagated ideal of a “good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) restricted to her home and family, highlighted the discrepancy between reality and the social and legal norms, i.e. between the present and the traditional female role. The fact that this caused a broader public to discuss the topic was due not least to the provocative character of these so-called “new women” (*atarashii onna*) associated with the Seitōsha.

Despite increasing individualist tendencies, however, the positions of the sexes remained highly unequal, both in terms of civil and constitutional rights and in terms of education. Women were not to take part in the political or intellectual life of their country. On the other hand, the relative prosperity and the comparatively liberal and open-minded atmosphere of the Twenties enabled all citizen, not only women, to lead a western, consumerist lifestyle. Many periodicals and journals founded in early Taishō portray a positive interest in personality development and an individual environment, and conceive the idea of the private home in its urban context. Tōkyō in particular offers a rich and varied display of goods and entertainment, always of the latest fashion. Cafés become the club of the common man; cinemas, dance halls, sports events or merely the lively streets of the big city provide the scenery for an incessant show, if not the show itself. The boundaries between private and public life become more diffuse and the differences between the sexes, whose spheres during the Meiji period had been carefully separated in the national interest, are increasingly obscured.

Towards the end of Taishō the term *modan gāru*, later abbreviated to *moga*, appears for the first time in print, denoting the new type of women who experiment uninhibitedly with hitherto gender specific characteristics and who, in conduct and manners, do not submit to the traditional female ideal. Many contemporary texts note the strikingly “modern” and “western” appearance of these young ladies whose radical demeanour in the eyes of most authors transcends the limits of a mere whim of fashion. Changes in the outward appearance such as a short haircut, western clothing or an unconventional kimono are interpreted as a measure of female self-esteem and as a symptom of an irreversible shift in the relationship of the sexes.



“The country girl’s dream”. Asada Isao, 1930.

Undershirt and loincloth substitute for western fashion, a towel hides long hair, mushroom and copper coin are umbrella and wristwatch, and a pair of radishes stands for slender legs. (Shimizu Isao. *Manga zasshi hakubutsukan*, vol. 10. Kokusho Kankōkai, Tōkyō, 1987, p. 48.)

The *modan gāru* figures not only in the discussion whether in cultural matters Japan should revert to its traditions determined by Confucian values or, as in other aspects of life, emulate the West. Perhaps more fundamentally she also comes into the cross-fire of the debate on the issue of the female principle in a world order on the brink of disintegration.

Despite the attention this phenomenon attracts from the media, the image of the *modan gāru* remains strangely opaque, her character twofold. Depending on the viewpoint of the observer, she is either the ideal of a modern working woman, independent both economically and emotionally, who discards the traditional female role in favour of a more conscious and individual way of life, or a purely materialist and fashion oriented, egoistic and narcissistic young consumerist, symptom of a declining and decadent society. Thus this highly ambivalent notion, so frequently encountered in the newspapers and periodicals of the years following the earthquake, often reveals much more about the inclinations of the particular author than about the sociological phenomenon itself. We do not learn who the *moga* was, but how she was seen: whereas the existence of young women trying to realize a new concept of life is a statistically ascertainable fact, the subject of the discussions is a fiction, epitomizing a whole array of subconscious hopes and anxieties.

The texts of this period only rarely mention the *modan bōi*, the linguistic, but not social counterpart of the *modan gāru*. Among the few exceptions is the 1927 essay *Modan gāru, modan bōi* by the socialist Yamakawa Kikue<sup>1</sup>, where she dismisses with irony the accusation that Russia was involved in the present development. Instead, the appearance of a hedonic character is seen merely as a typical concomitant phenomenon of any social upheaval, and in this sense *moga* and *mobo* are comparable with the sons and daughters of the decadent upper

class towards the end of the Tokugawa period, who similarly had no ambition other than the pursuit of pleasure. She argues that as the members of the ruling class slowly realize that capitalism has reached a dead end, some of them react by leading the reactionary forces, others by committing suicide or seeking distraction in fleeting pleasures. Thus, for Yamakawa the situation is clear: "Without class-consciousness the bourgeois young man becomes a *modan bōi*, with class-consciousness he turns reactionary. That is the only difference." The *modan gāru* is not mentioned in this context. It seems that in the late Twenties even a socialist female author could not imagine a woman as an active member of a political movement.

However, Yamakawa Kikue is not the only woman writer critical towards this new type of woman. The torchbearer of the Seitōsha, Hiratsuka Raichō, who to no small extent had sparked and inspired the debate on the *atarashii onna* and probably would gladly have welcomed the *modan gāru* as harbinger of a better, more emancipated age, had her difficulties with the markedly unpolitical and epicurean attitude of these young women. In order to resolve the discrepancy between wishful thinking and reality, Hiratsuka distinguishes between the "real" and the "fake" *modan gāru*, and in 1927 drafts a counter-model to the prevailing stereotype, entitled *Kaku arubeki modan gāru*<sup>2</sup>, the "*modan gāru* as she should be". The characteristics of the *moga* promenading through the Ginza in a knee-long skirt, light silk stockings and high heels, with bobbed hair and bright, red lips are described as merely superficial and any woman, given enough time and money, could transform herself into such a *moga*. The real, the true *modan gāru* however convinces by virtue of inner values. While the "slaves of fashion" find their fulfillment in constructing themselves as objects of male desires, a true *modan gāru* is not only the equal and worthy "favourite daughter" of the *atarashii onna*, but surpasses her in having transcended not only social barriers, but also her own thought structures and behavioural patterns. Now she no longer lives in discord with society, but in harmony with herself and the world. A real *modan gāru* therefore has no reason to be ashamed of this label and should not resent it, but rather vitalize it. Then the false *modan gāru* would soon disappear.

The ambivalence with which this notion was used even towards the end of the Twenties becomes obvious in the 1930 essay *Hyaku pāsento moga* by Ōa Sōichi<sup>3</sup>. In the first section this term denotes a young woman from the scintillating crowd he finds so incomprehensible and somewhat embarrassing, i.e. the *moga* as a member of a particular group as perceived by society. This he sets off in the second section against contrasting, assumedly modern values, embodied by a class conscious woman confronting contemporary social problems. The eponymous heroine, the "one hundred percent *moga*" from the third and last section, he considers merely a result and victim of the contemporary circumstances he so intensely dislikes, a *modan gāru* in the sense of a woman simply shaped and shaken by the world in which she lives.

But the so-called *modan gāru* has not only sparked off a theoretical discussion. Because of its novelty and its provocative potential this unconventional type of woman also inspired many aspects of cultural life. Contemporary reflections can be found, for instance, in



“At the coffee shop”. Fukase Hiroshi, 1926.

The waitress: “From now on, I am also a *modan gāru*.”

The man: “Hoho, what’s your name?”

The waitress: “I write it down in English.”

Finally she writes down what a student has taught her only the day before: OTEMBA.

*Otenba* is not English, but Japanese: A tomboy, a minx, a romp.

(Shimizu Isao. *Manga ni egakareta Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa*. Kyōikusha, Tōkyō, 1988, p. 108.)



“Scene in the Ginza in the second year of Shōwa”. Kishida Ryūsei, 1927.

(Kishida Ryūsei. *Kishida Ryūsei zenshū*, vol. 4. Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō, 1979, p. 299.)

advertising graphics where, as in the arts, the motif of a woman is used to symbolize longing, desire, and pleasure. It should be noted, however, that now the woman is also discovered in

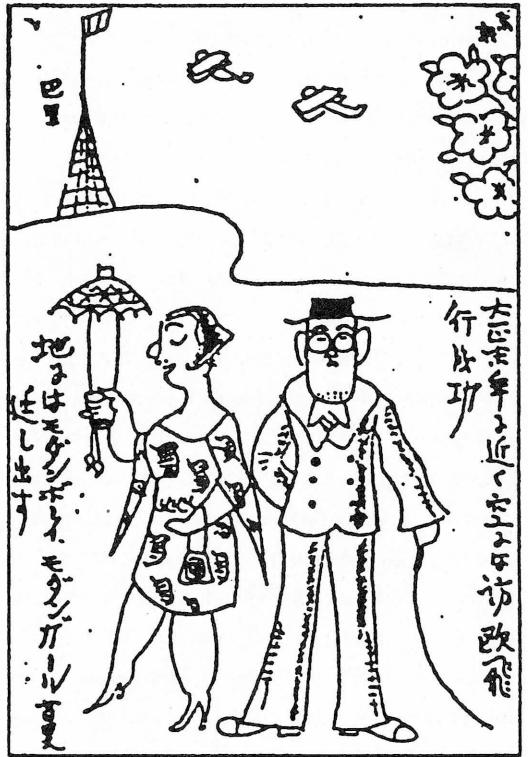
her role as administrator of the family finances, and also addressed directly as an independent customer and consumer. On the whole, the advertisements of the Twenties have probably exerted considerable influence on the way women saw themselves and were perceived by others. Women, in the flesh or on posters, achieved a ubiquitous presence in the streets, and the daily encounters with the many public displays of an idealized and ethereal, but nevertheless "commonplace" female image served to link the imaginary ideal with the ordinary real woman. Thus, the woman in the commercial arts appeared as an elegant incarnation of modernity and stood for the progressive and up-to-date way of life.

Cinema film was another medium that reached a wide public and was able to spread a larger-than-life female ideal. Cinema was a window to the West which conveyed immediate impressions of cultural peculiarities, lifestyles and value systems. While on the one hand Tōkyō applauded world famous personalities, as international as the spirit of the time, the cinema created new Japanese stars offering new possibilities of identification. After 1920 Comedy experienced a new boom, not at least because of the escapist preferences of an audience that had survived the 1923 earthquake and begun to feel the effects of the economic depression in the late Twenties. At around the same time so-called *shomingeki* appeared, depicting the life of the petit bourgeoisie. Both genres (which might well overlap) could use the motif of the *moga*, either as a sprightly young flapper who creates confusion, or as an often melancholic rebel against the prevailing value system.

In the literature of the Twenties and Thirties, in essays as well as in belles lettres, this newfangled woman is encountered again. Although the term *modan gāru* is not always explicitly mentioned, the woman on the threshold between tradition and modernity is unmistakably her. And the literary figure is no less controversial than her counterpart in real life. For example, the portrayal of the avaricious and self-indulgent nymphet Naomi in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's 1924 novel *Chijin no ai*<sup>4</sup> gave rise to fierce criticism. Naomi, a mixture of Galatea and *femme fatale*, gets beyond her creator's control and finally perverts the conventional relationship between the sexes. She thus represents the theme of the beautiful, baneful woman, which is well established in both European and Japanese intellectual history and by no means an invention of the 20th century. Tanizaki, however, endows his female seductress with the characteristics and accessories of the modern women of his time.

In the character of Yumiko from Kawabata Yasunari's 1929 serialized novel *Asakusa kurenaidan*<sup>5</sup> the reader similarly encounters a young woman whose conduct does not agree with the common perceptions of femininity. Playfully alternating between roles, Yumiko confronts the narrator sometimes as a masculine young woman, sometimes as a feminine young man. While embodying the modern androgynous type, her portrayal combines a radically new female self-perception with unreflected ideas of allegedly ontologically based male and female qualities. This inner contradiction becomes obvious in her words: "If only you take a close look, you will see. I am not a woman."

If gender and sex are seen as one, then any deviation from the norm can only be considered an abnormality and aberration. Among the three female protagonists from Uno



*Modan bōi* and *modan gāru* in a sketch by Hosokihara Seiki, about 1925.  
 (*Nihon bunkashi taikai*, vol. 12, *Taishō Shōwa jidai*. Shōgakkan, Tōkyō, 1968, p. 373.)

Chiyo's 1935 novel *Iro zange*<sup>6</sup>, which is generally regarded a contemporary documentation of the *modan gāru* and literary quintessence of the Twenties, the behaviour of Takao in particular blatantly contradicts the socially accepted patterns and must appear in the eyes of the narrator Yuasa as "crazy" (*kichigai*), "outrageous" (*toppi*), or "cross-grained" (*amanojaku*). Particular piquancy is added by the fact that while *Iro zange* purports to be an authentic account of the romantic adventures of the artist Tōgō Seiji, the author herself has been an extremely unconventional woman whose circumstances may to a considerable extent be considered characteristic of a *modan gāru*. It might thus be suspected that the story is given a deliberate irony by one of the few woman writers who could have contributed personal experience to the public discussion on the *modan gāru*.

Before concluding, I should like to dwell on the 1931 short novel *Kiriko no asa* by the literary critic, translator and writer Itō Sei<sup>7</sup>. Stylistically pertaining to the historically young literary technique of *stream of consciousness*, the narrative rambles on without particular climax and, imitating spoken language, chronicles Kiriko's idly straying thoughts which seem to rise almost from dreamy slumber. Passages of associatively linked elements, characterized as Kiriko's thoughts by brackets, alternate with brief but precise "stage directions". If the short text were to be put on stage, all that would be seen would be a young woman who spends the first half of the play in bed and finally, after a protracted morning toilet, has a western



*Moga* and *mobo*, in a coffee shop and in the streets. Hosokihara Seiki, 1928.

(Endō Takeshi and Ishikawa Akira. *Shashin ni miru Nihon yōfukushi*. Bunka Shuppan Kyoku, Tōkyō, 1980, p. 184.)

breakfast. She thus literally exhibits a *bata kusai modan raifu*, a life with a European flavour. Most noticeable is the frequent use of foreign words and brand names. The young lady sleeps in pyjamas, cares for her skin with “Bälz-Water” and “Eau de Cologne”, has coffee and toast for breakfast, sings popular songs, dances in the theatre to the rhythms of a jazz band with tambourines and saxophones, and generally copies, seemingly without any reflections the lifestyle which is conveyed as up-to-date.

In connection with the clearly materialist orientation and the relatively superficial attitude shown in *Kiriko no asa*, which Itō Sei wrote at the age of twenty-six, a comparison with the 1980 novel *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* of the twenty-four year old Tanaka Yasuo<sup>8</sup> suggests itself. Although almost half a century separates the two novels, the similarities between Itō's Kiriko and Tanaka's Yuri are striking. Both are neither married nor under parental control, and have a job which elevates them to the beauty ideal of their generation but does not offer a safe perspective. However, neither of them worries about the future. Their emotions and actions are all directed towards the present, oriented towards short-lived fashion trends, and they are eager to consume. In their private life they choose their own friends and do not (yet) regard marriage as a natural and desirable form of existence for an adult woman.

Although in the last fifty years other boroughs with better transport connections like Shinjuku, Shibuya and Ikebukuro have overtaken Asakusa, and even the Ginza has become

quieter since the metropolitan youngsters prefer Roppongi and leave the Ginza to business people with lavish expense accounts, this shift has done nothing to diminish the attractiveness of Tōkyō for the granddaughters of the *moga*. Suzuki Sadami notes: “The women liberate themselves from the restrictions of the family and the parents, and live on their own in the big city. But the term *modan gāru* appears because there is nothing comparable to such a concept.”<sup>9</sup>



“What a Miss *moga* carries around with her”. Kobayashi Kiyoshi, 1928.

Among other things, these are a small English dictionary for everyday use, a love letter, padding in her bra, chocolate, high energy nutrition and a fake visiting-card.

(Shimizu Isao. *Manga ni egakareta Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa*. Kyōikusha, Tōkyō, 1988, p. 162.)

In 1980, i.e. in the same year *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* was published, Gebhard Hielscher writes: “Many young Japanese women naturally regard the anonymity of the big cities as the best possibility to free themselves from traditional bounds. It is here that the example of a modern woman can be found most often. On the other hand, the turmoil of the metropolis so disorients many young girls from the countryside that they willingly submit to conditions which may offer a certain support and security, but ultimately cement their position as second-rate citizens. The ‘small freedom’ of having relative wealth and opportunity for enjoyment lets





“The *moga* and the *kodakku*”. Kobayashi Kiyoshi, 1927.

The *moga*'s fall reveals what has been hidden in her smart camera case: Her lunch, a simple *obento*. . . *Kodakku* is derived from the brand name Kodak.

(Shimizu Isao. *Manga ni egakareta Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa*. Kyōkusha, Tōkyō, 1988, p. 163.)

them forget their disadvantages in terms of education, salary, or advancement. Quite carelessly they enjoy the advantages of the moment without providing for their future.”<sup>10</sup>

It would seem almost as if social development had stagnated in the half century that separates Yuri from Kiriko. The boundaries of sexual behaviour are wider, the demands and expectations have risen, the supply in consumer goods has increased, the speed of fashion trends has accelerated, and prices have multiplied. But the principal characteristics have remained the same, except perhaps for the fact that a *moga*'s concept of life is no longer considered novel and *modan*.

For a more detailed study of the *modan gāru* I should like to refer to my recent book *La donna è mobile. Das modan gāru als Erscheinung der modernen Stadtkultur Japans*. Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, ed., *Iaponia Insula. Studien zur Kultur und Gesellschaft Japans*, vol. 1. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1994, 171 pp., 58 ill.

#### Endnotes:

1 Yamakawa Kikue. “Modan gāru, modan bōi”. *Yamakawa Kikue shū*, vol. 4. Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō,

- 1982, 268-271.
- 2 Hiratsuka Raichō. "Kaku arubeki modan gāru". *Hiratsuka Raichō chosakushū*, vol. 4. Ōtsuki Shoten, Tōkyō, 1983, 290-297.
  - 3 Ōya Sōichi. "Hyaku pāsento moga". Suzuki Sadami, ed., *Modan gāru no yūwaku (Modan toshi bungaku II)*. Heibonsha, Tōkyō, 1989, 396-402.
  - 4 Tanizaki Jun'ichirō. "Chijin no ai". *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* vol. 8. Chūo Kōronsha, 1967, 223-243.
  - 5 Kawabata Yasunari. "Asakusa kurenaidan". *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū*, vol. 2. Shinchōsha, Tōkyō, 1970, 7-154.
  - 6 Uno Chiyo. "Iro zange". *Uno Chiyo zenshū*, vol. 3. Chūo Kōronsha, Tōkyō, 1977, 103-315.
  - 7 Itō Sei. "Kiriko no asa". Suzuki Sadami, ed., *Modan gāru no yūwaku (Modan toshi bungaku II)*. Heibonsha, Tōkyō, 1989, 88-94.
  - 8 Tanaka Yasuo. *Nantonaku, kurisutaru*. Kawade Shobō, Tōkyō, 1981.
  - 9 Suzuki Sadami. "Kaidai". Suzuki Sadami, ed., *Modan gāru no yūwaku (Modan toshi bungaku II)*. Heibonsha, Tōkyō, 1989, 472-477, p. 472.
  - 10 Gebhard Hielscher. "Die Japanerin. Eine Einführung". Gebhard Hielscher, ed., *Die Frau*. (OAG-Reihe *Japan modern*, vol. 1). Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, 1984, 13-22, p. 14.