

MEDIA MIX

The darker side of motherhood

Shining a light on the complex and disconcerting realities of maternal child abuse in Japan

By PHILIP BRASOR

In the first edition of the famous book of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, published in 1812, the story that has become known as "Snow White" had a different villain than the one we all know and hate. Snow White's original nemesis was her biological mother. In later editions, the evil queen became the heroine's stepmother in order to make the story less scary for children. It's easy to assume that had the Grimms not made this change, Walt Disney would have.

The wicked stepmother is an enduring trope in literature, which doesn't mean it's a reflection of reality. Abusive stepmothers exist, but the fact that the Grimms themselves had to alter a folk tale to make it palatable to literate children and the refined sensibilities of their parents just goes to show how appalling is the idea of a woman mistreating the issue of her womb. Mean fathers we can accept to a



Breaking the cycle: Abused by her father as a child, writer Miri Ryu realized she needed counselling after she began striking her own son. KYODO PHOTO

certain degree, but mean mothers contradict the natural order.

This image was turned on its head in the recent NHK drama "Te no Hira no Memo" ("Palm Memo"), about the trial of a widowed career woman accused of neglecting her 6-year-old son. The story's potential for explicating the complex feelings motherhood engenders was squandered by a plot twist that revealed the defendant was *not* the boy's natural mother. His death, it turned out, was due to a momentary failure of will on her part, and it became clear that the woman loved him. What at first seemed like a frank portrait of a mother who couldn't live up to the ideal became a story about a woman who, contrary to conventional expectations, adored her stepson.

Though it offered a welcome corrective to the evil-stepmother stereotype, the drama reinforced another myth; that of a mother's unconditional love. In recent years, child abuse has gained traction in the Japanese media as a serious social problem, and the press has had to wrestle with the way it approaches the maternal ideal.

The women's weekly Fujin Koron recently ran a series of articles on intrafamily abuse. In one, psychiatrist Toshihiro Otaki points out that the media tends to focus on "extreme cases" in which "immature, poor parents abuse their children." In many of these cases the main abuser is either a stepfather or the boyfriend of a single mother. These situations are easy to explain, and Otaki believes the press' avoidance of less "typical" abuse stories exacerbates the problem.

One of Otaki's patients was a woman he calls Tanaka. Alone at home with her baby while her husband was constantly away on business trips, Tanaka had only her insecurities to keep her company. Her son suffered from a skin problem, and her lack of success in bringing him comfort undermined her confidence. When she found herself pregnant again, she secretly didn't want the child, and after her daughter was born she started abusing both children. Fortunately, she sought help. The children were placed in a facility while Tanaka received counseling.

The stress of believing she "wasn't a perfect mother" compounded her mild depression. Raising a child is difficult, and it's important for a mother to create distance between herself and her offspring. Tanaka couldn't do that because she had been conditioned to think it was selfish, a denial of the

"maternal instinct." When this desperation manifested as abusive impulses — she once choked her infant daughter and pushed her son's head underwater during a bath — she saw herself as "an evil mother," but she was only weak and lonely.

After nine months of counseling, Tanaka was reunited with her children. That was nine years ago, and she says she has never abused them since then, presumably because she has created the necessary distance. In fact, she now has a full-time job, still considered a negative factor in child-rearing: A career woman can't possibly be as good a mother as a homemaker.

Another woman who sought counseling when she realized she was becoming abusive is the award-winning writer Miri Ryu, who has developed a cottage industry out of documenting her own difficult childhood. Raised by an abusive father and a complacent mother who separated when she was a girl, raped by a landlord when she was 5, and on her own since she was 15, Ryu has used her novels and essays to explore her misanthropy and self doubt.

A single mother, Ryu didn't realize that hitting her son qualified as abuse until recently, as she writes in another article in Fujin Koron. She sought counseling and wrote candidly about the experience in her new book, "Family Secret." Because striking her son when he misbehaved was reflexive, she didn't think much of it until her counselor made her remember the beatings she received from her father, beatings she'd thought she deserved.

Ryu has always maintained a certain distance from her son. "I named him Takeharu before he was born," she writes. "But after he was born I always called him 'kid.'" Since she lacked a "maternal feeling," she read books on child-rearing and was frustrated with all the "work" involved. Antisocial by nature, she had to engage with society once her son started going to school. She hated the process and took her frustrations out on him.

Now she realizes that the cycle of abuse worked through her: What she had received she acted out. Her greatest fear is that this cycle will perpetuate through Takeharu.

Neither Ryu nor Tanaka advanced to a level of abuse that threatened their children's lives, but they asked for help. The Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare reports that, following the

well-publicized deaths of two children last spring in Osaka after their single mother abandoned them in a locked apartment, there were more than 13,000 reports of possible child abuse/neglect nationwide over the next three months. People know evil mothers when they see them, just as they know perfect mothers. Between those two extremes is a lot of uncharted territory.

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