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To the memory of Professor Karin Tomala
Whom we lost for ever

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FORUM MITHANI

New Heroines for a New Era? Single Mothers in Contemporary Japanese Television Drama

Abstract

The figure of the single mother has played an important role in Japanese television drama over several decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, the figure of the single mother was often used to uphold traditional, patriarchal notions of family and gender, which stressed the importance of the mother's role in childrearing and running the household, and limited the role of women to the domestic sphere. However, as female participation in all areas of society has increased, and women have begun to question the assumption that marriage and motherhood are an essential part of their lives, so Japanese television drama has responded, reflecting and sometimes anticipating these changes. Today, single mothers in Japanese television dramas are actively rejecting patriarchal structures by forming women-only support networks or forging new identities as independent career women. However, very little academic attention has been paid to these representations. This paper hopes to make a small contribution towards rectifying this situation by analyzing the representations of single motherhood in contemporary television drama.

In her study of unmarried mothers in contemporary Japan, Ekaterina Hertog notes the considerable media attention single (in particular, unmarried) motherhood receives in Japan, considering it is still a relatively rare phenomenon.[1] Mother-and-child households (*boshi setai*) made up only 2 per cent of all Japanese households in 2011.[2] Yet the media is awash with stories of single mothers. In 2011 alone, the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper and its affiliated publications ran 196 articles referencing 'single mothers' (*shinguru mazā*) or 'single-mother households' (*boshi-setai* or *boshi-katei*).[3] The topic has been particularly popular in television drama, with a wave of dramas featuring single mothers in recent years. In the last ten years, dramas such as *Ashita Tenki ni Naare (*Hoping for Good Weather Tomorrow), *Roomshare no Onna* (Roomshare Woman), *87%*, *14-Sai no Haha* (14-Year-Old Mother), *Konkatsu Rikatsu* (Seeking Marriage, Seeking Divorce), *Mother*, *Magerarenai Onna* (The

[1] Ekaterina Hertog, *Tough Choices: Bearing an Illegitimate Child in Contemporary Japan*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 1–2.

[2] Data collated from: *Heisei 23-Nendo Zenkoku Boshi Setai Tō Chōsa* [National Survey on Single-Mother and Other Households, 2011]: http://www.mhlw.go.jp/seisakunitsuite/bunya/kodomo/kodomo_kosodate/boshi-katei/boshi-setai_h23/ and *Heisei 22-Nen Kokusei Chōsa* [National Census, 2010]: http://www.stat.go.jp/data/kokusei/2010/kihon1/pdf/gaiyou1.pdf (accessed 23.08.2013).

[3] Kikuzo II Visual database: www.database.asahi.com/library2e/ (accessed 23.08.2013).

Unbending Woman), *Dirty Mama* and *Single Mothers* have all featured single mothers in main roles.

Hertog suggests the main reasons for the low rates of single motherhood in Japan lie in the widespread support for the 'two-parent ideal' and the perception that single motherhood has negative repercussions on children.[4] Recent surveys seem to support this view; according to the 2005 World Values Survey, 89 per cent of Japanese respondents agreed that "a child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily".[5] Furthermore, more Japanese disapproved than approved of single motherhood (36 per cent versus 23 per cent) and appeared to support marriage; over 94 per cent disagreed with idea that "marriage is an outdated institution".[6]

Hertog suggests this negative perception of single motherhood is reinforced by negative representations of single mothers found in the media.[7] In particular, she describes the way in which the situation of single-mother characters in three dramas was depicted as "far from acceptable".[8] Certainly, the theme of single motherhood offers the potential for melodrama and tragedy, with many obstacles for the heroine to overcome, and creators of television drama have often exploited it to inject drama into the narrative arch of a storyline. Indeed, the single mother could be seen as the ideal heroine for creators and viewers of television drama. According to Ota Toru, a well-known producer of popular 'trendy' dramas, "women are hypersensitive in a negative way toward other women who are too dependent on men… So it is important that the heroine stand on her own. She must bear her solitude and not ask men for help".[9]

However, that is not to say that all representations of single motherhood are uniformly negative. The representations of single motherhood, and indeed of all women in Japanese television drama, has evolved significantly over recent decades. During the golden era of television drama in the 1960s and 1970s, single mothers were usually strong, reliable and cheerful characters who devoted their lives to home and family and ultimately reinforced patriarchal concepts regarding gender and family. This reflected the position of women in real-life Japanese society, which idealized the image of the housewife and mother, lovingly nurturing her children and supporting her corporate warrior husband.[10] However, in recent years, the representation of single mothers in contemporary Japan has become more diversified, again reflecting the changes in real-life society which have seen growing numbers of women reject the 'professional housewife' ideal. Single mothers in contemporary Japanese drama are no longer content to stay at home, but are extending their influence to traditionally male-dominated spheres of influence, such as law and politics. Furthermore, they are challenging traditional structures of marriage and family by creating their own

[4] Hertog, *Tough Choice*…, pp. 127–150.

[5] World Values Survey: www.worldvaluessurvey.org (accessed 20.08.2013).

[6] Ibidem.

[7] Hertog, *Tough Choices*…, pp. 100–103.

[8] Ibid., p. 132.

[9] Ōta Tōru**,** 'Producing (Post-) Trending Japanese TV Dramas', in *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, Kōichi Iwabuchi (ed.), Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004, pp. 69–86.

[10] Emiko Ochiai, *The Japanese Family System in Transition: A Sociological Analysis of Family Change in Postwar Japan*, Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation, 1997, p. 50.

women-only support networks, or choosing independence. Further, many single mothers in television drama lead happy, successful lives bringing up contented, wellcared-for children.

The theme of single motherhood has clearly captured the imagination of both producers and consumers of a variety of different media in Japan. However, these media representations have received little academic attention. This paper will attempt to make a small contribution to this much neglected field of study by offering an analysis of representations of single mothers in television dramas produced and broadcast during the last ten years. This analysis is by no means exhaustive; limits of space and time mean I cannot analyze every single television drama featuring a single mother during this period. Some form of television drama is shown every day on Japanese television channels, occupying many hours of daytime and evening programming every week. Further, it comes in a variety of forms, including the serial (*renzoku*) drama, usually comprising 10–12 weekly, one-hour episodes, and the one-off (*tanpatsu*), feature-length drama. NHK's daily, morning drama (*asadora*) is a genre in itself that deserves much more attention than I could accord it. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on only a few, serial dramas broadcast during evening schedule slots over the last ten years. By offering an analysis of selected representations in relevant dramas, I hope to demonstrate how the representation of single motherhood can be used to support or challenge traditional notions of marriage and family. However, before I discuss specific dramas, it would be useful to touch on the power of such representations to influence viewers.

The power of television drama

During the autumn of 2006, the television drama series *14-Sai no Haha* (14-Year-Old Mother) caused a huge stir in the Japanese media and the wider public. The drama courted controversy with its shocking storyline of a junior high school student who becomes pregnant and gives birth at the tender age of 14. It was very popular with viewers, achieving ratings of more than 20 per cent, and many column inches were devoted to its subject matter in newspapers and magazines.[11] On the one hand, in a survey of parents, it came second highest in a list of programmes they were least willing to let their junior high school children watch. On the other, it won the top TV drama award from the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan in 2007 for its 'realistic' portrayal of an ordinary family.[12] The debate continued among the many viewers who took to the official online bulletin board system (BBS) to air their views. While some (mostly teenaged) viewers applauded the central protagonist, 14-year-old Miki, claiming her to be admirable, others (mostly mothers over 30) criticized the drama for 'glorifying' teenage sex and pregnancy, while ignoring the realities of single motherhood.[13] While this drama managed to polarize public opinion, undeniably parents, broadcasters and ordinary viewers on all sides of the debate were united in recognizing the power such fictional representations have on social perceptions of single motherhood and family.

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[11] 'Gōruden kara bunsan' (From Golden Era to Dispersion), *Asahi Shimbun*, 20 November 2006, evening edition, available at Kikuzou II Visual database (accessed 20.08.2013).

[12] Hertog, *Tough Choices*…, p. 1.

[13] http://www.ntv.co.jp/14/bbs1/board0.html (accessed 28.06.2013).

Television has become a universal medium. Viewing rates are particularly high in Japan, where a survey carried out in 2010 found that it was the most widely accessed form of media, regardless of age, with 92 per cent of respondents saying they watched television every day. Television drama is particular popular in Japan; some 43 per cent of respondents said they watched some drama, making it the third most frequently watched category of programming, after news shows and weather forecasts. Furthermore, over 90 per cent of respondents felt that television had some influence on society, and more than 60 per cent believed that television influenced themselves as individuals.[14]

As a medium that is mostly received in the home, it is not surprising that television's greatest influence has been on the family. Television played an important role in creating a model of the ideal family in post-war Japan and was particularly influential over women, who turned it into a "virtual electronic community of housewives".[15] This influence can still be seen today; Susan Holloway's study of mothers living in the Kansai area found that positive representations of mothers on television, such as the protagonist of the immensely popular 1980s drama *Oshin,* served as a model of ideal motherhood to which some women aspired.[16]

Furthermore, the repetition of dominant media representations have the power not only to influence one's perceptions of others, but also one's perception of oneself. In her essays on gender, Teresa de Lauretis explains that the production and reproduction of dominant representations through various 'technologies' (in this case, television) produces a cultural order shared by the members of that culture. The repeated performance of these representations reinforces certain codes of conduct and belief, to the extent that these representations are accepted by members of society as self-representations, thus eventually becoming self-representations.[17] Ekaterina Hertog's study of unmarried mothers in contemporary Japan found that some of the mothers she interviewed related their negative perceptions of single motherhood to the negative representations they had seen in television dramas.[18] Some continued to hold on to this negative perception of themselves as 'bad mothers', even when the evidence appeared to show they were negotiating their roles as mothers successfully and their children were experiencing no obvious ill-effects.[19]

Scholars working in the field of television studies relate the medium's power of influence to its closeness to 'reality'. John Fiske and John Hartley argue that because it is a more conventional medium than other forms of culture and its codes relate more closely to reality, the boundary between television and reality is difficult to define.[20] This observation

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[14] Hirata Akihiro, Morofuji Emi and Aramaki Hiroshi, 'Television Viewing and Media Use Today: From 'The Japanese and Television 2010' Survey', in *NHK Broadcasting Studies*, Tokyo: NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, No. 9, 2011, pp. 1–46.

[15] Jayson Makoto Chun, *'A Nation of a Hundred Million Idiots?': A Social History of Japanese Television, 1953–73*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 93.

[16] Susan D. Holloway, *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 48.

[17] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, p. 12.

[18] Hertog, *Tough Choices*…, p. 68.

[19] Ibid., pp. 127–150.

[20] J. Fiske and J. Hartley**,** *Reading Television*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 47.

is not limited to 'factual' media, but also relates to fictional narratives, such as those offered in television drama. As James Monaco has argued, "no matter how apolitical the work of art may seem, every work has political relevance".[21] Creators of drama are well aware of the power of their works on the perceptions of viewers. Award-winning screenwriter Okada Yoshikazu describes the power of television drama as "immeasurable".[22] In a discussion on 'occupational dramas' (such as those set in a hospital or a police station), he elaborates: "In reality, 'occupational dramas' have a tremendous power of influence on society. It is not a demand for reality. (Viewers) believe the drama is real. This is because we do not know what police rooms look like. We do not know how investigations are conducted… That is why we end up believing what is depicted in television dramas… Of course, we realize that it is the world of television drama, however, because in practical terms we do not have any other image, at some point, the image in our heads becomes the world inside the drama".[23] Of course, as Fiske and Hartley rightly point out, this reality is not natural but a constructed version of reality.[24]

Recognizing the power of the medium, many creators of television drama actively seek to educate and influence viewers. In the NHK drama *Single Mothers*, the creators use a fictionalized story to educate viewers about the real-life struggle of single mothers' advocacy groups against an attempt by the government to curb welfare payments. The drama even features helpful text boxes that appear on screen to explain terms such as 'domestic violence' to viewers. On the official website for NTV drama *Dirty Mama!*, the creators of the drama claim that the main protagonist Maruoka Takako is "sending a rude yell to all those women looking for happiness. Telling them they should stand on their own two feet…".[25]

Furthermore, some television dramas aim to go beyond the representation of a version of 'reality'. In her study of television drama from the mid-1990s, Hilaria Gössman noted the emergence of dramas featuring fathers taking on the role of primary carer, a phenomenon which was (and continues to be) a rarity in real-life Japan. She viewed this as an attempt by creators of drama to sow the "seeds of future trends and conceptualizations of gender roles".[26] Thus, television drama does not simply aim to entertain, but also to educate, stimulate debate and legitimize social change.

But if creators of media, such as television drama, have the power to influence, we must not forget that they, and the messages they create, are themselves influenced by various internal and external factors. Creators of media do not exist in a vacuum; they are fellow members of society, susceptible to the same influences and pressures, be they political, cultural, ideological, social or commercial, as everyone else. Their productions are informed by their life experiences and daily interactions with the outside world. As Fiske and Hartley (and Stuart Hall before

[21] James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 34.

[22] Okada Yoshikazu, *TV Dorama Ga Suki Datta* [I Used to Love TV Dramas], Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005, p. 73. All translations from the original Japanese are my own.

[23] Ibid., p. 117.

[24] Fiske and Hartley, *Reading Television*…, p. 129.

[25] *Dirty Mama!*: http://www.ntv.co.jp/dirtymama/intro/index.html (accessed 20.08.2013).

[26] Gössmann, 'New Role Models for Men and Women? Gender in Japanese TV Dramas', in *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*, Timothy J. Craig (ed.), New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000, pp. 207–221.

them) have argued, the people who are responsible for the 'production' of media messages only mediate but do not originate them.[27] As Okada puts it, television drama is "a mirror that reflects that period of time, whether the creators of the drama are aware or this or not. This includes dramas that don't aim to depict the 'present'. Even in these dramas, you will always find signs of that particular era. The atmosphere of the era has been sealed into it".[28]

However, in spite of the widespread recognition of television drama's important role in reflecting current trends and influencing opinion on a social and individual level, there has been little academic focus on it. Most research has focused on genres and made generalizations based on quantitative studies, playing little attention to the content and narrative of specific programs. There has been criticism of this approach. Katja Valaskivi appreciates the need for more textual analysis of television drama, blaming the lack of such attention on a general perception that television content is simply not thought of as worthy of qualitative analysis.[29] In her essay on soap operas, the close American relative of the Japanese television drama, Tania Modleski suggests the disrespect often paid to the genre is connected to its perception as a 'feminine' text. Conversely, Modleski believes, the femininity of the soap opera should be celebrated, rather than denigrated or ignored, as the genre offers an alternative narrative of pleasure to the dominant (masculine) narrative. Furthermore, she rejects the notion that it is not as worthy as other forms of art, suggesting "soap operas may be in the vanguard not just of TV art, but of all popular narrative art".[30]

Research on representation of women and gender in Japanese television drama is still a small field. There have been some notable studies carried out by Muramatsu Yasuko on female representation in 1970s and 1980s drama. Hilaria Gössmann has looked at the issue of gender in television dramas of the mid-1990s. In addition, Katja Valaskivi and Andrew Painter have offered analyses of two home dramas from the 1990s, both of which focused on the relationships between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. However, there has been very little research on the representation of women in television drama from 2000 onwards. Considering the significant social and demographic changes that Japan has encountered since then, a re-examination of female representation in contemporary television drama seems long overdue. In this paper, I hope to contribute to the debate regarding women in Japanese television drama by focusing on the representation of single mothers in evening, serial dramas from 2003–2012. First, however, it would be useful to look at the representation of women and family in Japanese television drama up to this period.

Women and family in Japanese television drama from the 1970s to 2000

The current boom in Japanese television dramas featuring single mothers in central roles is not entirely without precedent. In fact, the single mother was often a staple character of the home dramas (*hōmu dorama*) of the 1960s and 1970s. In her ground-breaking study

[27] J. Fiske and J. Hartley**,** *Reading Television*, p. 62. Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, S. Hall et al (eds.), London: Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 107–116.

[28] Okada, *TV Dorama*…, p. 3.

[29] Katja Valaskivi, *Wataru Seken Wa Oni Bakari: Mothers-in-law and Daughters-in-law in a Japanese Television Drama,* Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1995.

[30] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 87.

of female characterizations in dramas from the mid-1970s, Muramatsu Yasuko identified a particular character type, the 'reliable mother' (*tanomoshii haha*), which (with some exceptions) epitomized the depiction of women in these types of dramas.[31]

As the term suggests, home dramas revolved largely around daily, family life within the household. The main characters of home dramas almost always lived with other family members and were depicted in terms of their relationships to others, i.e. wife, husband, mother, father, daughter, son etc. These dramas tended to be upbeat, with characters that were mostly satisfied with their lot and led happy lives. Typical examples include *Kimottama kāsan* (Gutsy Mother, 1968–72) and *Arigatō* (Thank You, 1970–5).

Often single, due to circumstances beyond their control (the death of the husband etc.) rather than by choice, the 'reliable mother' was robust, assertive and independent. Even serious problems did not seem to affect her enthusiasm for everyday life. At the same time, she put others' needs before her own. Not only could she be relied on by members of her own family, she often also came to the rescue of others within the community. She was a kind, wise, motherly figure, who took satisfaction in protectively watching over others. 'Reliable mothers' tended to be employed in the service industries, working as hairdressers or running small eateries, where they could be their own boss. However, their power was usually confined to the context of the home and the local community. While offering a positive representation of the single mother that appeared to challenge the two-parent ideal, the 'reliable mother' also reinforced the notion that a woman's identity as a mother should be prioritized over her identity as a woman.[32]

These women contrasted with the 'suffering woman' (*taeru onna*), a character type identified by Muramatsu as the staple character of dramatic dramas from the same period. Characters appearing in these dramas were usually not as happy, and women were comparatively unhappier than men. Dramatic dramas were not as bound to the household as home dramas, and often featured characters that lived alone or had few family ties, leading to situations where single female characters often had no one to turn to in times of despair. One example of this type of drama was *Ju-hyō* (Tree Frost, 1974–5). Unlike the 'reliable mother', the 'suffering woman' was timid and weak, did not take an assertive role in deciding the course of her life, easily gave in to men and usually suffered in silence. Some women of this type were victims of domestic violence, others were single women who on the face of it were leading modern, successful lives in high-status occupations, but underneath retained a feminine vulnerability.[33]

The combination of these two types of representations served to reinforce conservative, patriarchal notions regarding gender roles and the status of women in society. Muramatsu concluded: "(These dramas) seem to be saying that, as long as women limit their stage to the narrow world of the household and daily life, they will be happy and secure, as they only have the power to take on this world. On the other hand, if they venture into the outside world, they are always powerless and weak".[34]

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[31] Muramatsu Yasuko, *Terebi Dorama no Joseigaku* [Women's Studies in Television Drama], Tokyo: Soutakusha, 1979.

[32] Ibid., pp. 150–151.

[33] Ibid., p. 163

[34] Ibid., p. 144

By the late 1970s, the idealized world of television drama began to catch up with the realities of life for the modern Japanese housewife. As the first drama to portray a housewife who has an extra-marital affair, *Kishibe no arubamu* (Photo Album on the Shore, 1977) suggested that home life might not be as idyllic as it seemed.[35] The 1980s saw a progressive change in gendered representations within Japanese television drama, with many dramas taking a critical position toward the idealized roles of wife and mother. Storylines featuring unhappy housewives venturing outside the home and into the workplace were commonplace. An NHK-sponsored study comparing evening dramas from 1974 and 1984 found there had been a shift away from nostalgia for three-generation families and warm community ties to an emphasis on friendship outside of the family. New dramas focused on the baby-boom generation and depicted women who did not sacrifice themselves for others but showed a strong sense of self-regard. By 1984, more dramas portrayed female characters questioning their current or future way of life – women deciding between career and family, or housewives seeking a new sense of purpose.[36] Hilaria Gössmann links these changes to Japan's rising divorce rate, evidence that women were no longer content with traditional notions of marriage and family.[37]

However, despite these changes in the portrayal of female characters, many traditional gender role stereotypes still remained. According to the NHK study, the number of female characters employed outside the home actually decreased from 63% in 1974 to 51% in 1984, in contrast to the changes in actual society. Therefore, 1984 dramas showed a disproportionate number of full-time housewives.[38] Working scenes were far more frequent for men than for women – 26 per cent versus 14 per cent – and far fewer men than women were depicted doing housework, proving that the traditional, gendered division of labor still existed in dramas.[39] In historical, action, mystery and detective dramas, men far outnumbered women, who tended to play 'accessory or decorative roles', often in the bedroom.[40] While female protagonists in the later dramas tended to be more modern and independent than their 1970s counterparts, they were still more likely to be emotional and family-oriented than men.[41] Muramatsu offered a negative assessment of the overall picture, arguing "we still find deep-rooted preconceptions of the role pattern of a dominant male and a subservient female, and the male-oriented view that women are only valuable as young and beautiful objects".[42]

The 1990s represented a sea change in Japanese television drama. The economic bubble had finally burst, and dramas depicting middle-class wealth and luxury were no longer seen

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[35] Gössmann, 'New Role Models…', pp. 207–221.

[36] Tetsuo Makita and Yasuko Muramatsu, 'Changing Themes and Gender Images in Japanese TV Dramas, 1974–1984', in *Studies of Broadcasting*, Tokyo: Theoretical Research Center, Radio & TV Culture Research Institute, Nippon Hoso Kyokai, No. 23, 1987, pp. 51–72.

[37] Gössmann, 'New Role Models…'.

[38] Makita and Muramatsu, 'Changing Themes and Gender Images…'.

[39] Ibidem.

[40] Yasuko Muramatsu, 'Of Women by Women for Women: Japanese Media Today', in *Studies of Broadcasting*, Tokyo: Theoretical Research Center, Radio & TV Culture Research Institute, Nippon Hoso Kyokai, No. 26, 1990, pp. 83–104.

[41] Makita and Muramatsu, 'Changing Themes and Gender Images…'.

[42] Muramatsu, 'Of Women by Women for Women…'.

to represent real-life society. As the popularity of the genre waned, television producers looked for new ideas and dramas with unusual storylines or characters pursuing alternative lifestyles emerged. The drama *Wagamama na onnatachi* (Selfish Women, 1992), celebrated the 'selfishness' of women daring to challenge social convention by pursuing careers, divorce and single-motherhood.[43] Even the home drama genre, while continuing to emphasize the importance of family, offered some criticism of the traditional gender system.[44] While the two-parent ideal remained largely unchallenged, television drama became more concerned with dismantling gender stereotypes and renegotiating the division of labor within the household. Dramas from the mid-1990s began to depict mothers returning to the workplace and fathers assuming childcare duties.[45] However, by the turn of the twenty-first century, more dramas featuring unorthodox family structures began to emerge. Kelly Hu's analysis of three dramas from this period found that the idea that traditional marriage and family automatically led to happiness were being questioned, and alternative structures such as the 'unmarried family' were being promoted as an "ideal alternative to the inflexibility and suppression of a modern family".[46]

As we have seen, the representation of women in Japanese television dramas from the 1960s through to the 1980s tended to conform to the traditional notions of gender in a society that continued to emphasize and prioritize the importance of women within the home over their contribution in public spheres of influence, such as the workplace. The narrative of the two-parent ideal remained largely unchallenged during this period. However, the 1990s saw increasing diversity in the representations of gender, with both men and women playing against stereotypes. Towards the end of the century, television drama featuring unconventional families also began to emerge, suggesting the possibility that the narrative of the two-parent ideal, which has held such strong sway over modern Japanese society, might finally be challenged. Since the advent of the twenty-first century, the concept of 'family' has continued to occupy a central place in Japanese television drama and again, the figure of the single mother has played a significant role in how this concept has been renegotiated. In the following sections, I offer a textual analysis of several recent dramas featuring single mothers which have aired during the last ten years. My aim is to demonstrate how the character of the single mother has been used in different ways to either support or challenge traditional notions regarding marriage, family and motherhood.

A return to idealized heroines and traditional, family values: *14-Year-Old Mother*

The beginning of the twenty-first century was a time of general malaise in Japanese society. The country had entered its second decade of economic woes, burdened by a rapidly ageing population, exacerbated by a declining birth rate that reached a low of 1.26

[43] Andrew A. Painter, 'The Telerepresentation of Gender in Japan', in *Re-Imaging Japanese Women*, Anne E. Imamura (ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 47–72.

[44] Valaskivi, *Wataru Seken*…

[45] Gössmann, 'New Role Models…'.

[46] Kelly Hu, 'Can't Live without Happiness: Reflexivity and Japanese TV Drama', in *Television, Japan, and Globalization*, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Eva Tsai and JungBong Choi (eds.), Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2010, p. 203.

in 2005.[47] Lawmakers feared they had gone too far in encouraging women into the workplace, as more chose to delay or reject marriage and family.[48] At the same time, horror stories in the media of mothers who abused, abandoned or even murdered children were becoming more frequent, leading social commentators to wonder whether Japanese women had lost their 'natural' maternal instinct.[49]

In television drama, the renegotiation of gender roles continued, both in the home and in the workplace. However, there was also a return to traditional family values, a concept that many felt had disappeared in modern Japanese society. The 2004 drama *At Home Dad*[50] aimed to challenge traditional ideas on the gendered division of labor by depicting families in which the fathers are responsible for housework and childcare while the mothers are the main breadwinners. However, it essentially promoted the message that cooperation and partnership between *two* parents was necessary for a harmonious family life. Both the main protagonist, a father in his thirties who has just been made redundant, and his wife, who has returned to the workplace after several years as a housewife, face many obstacles in their respective spheres of influence, which are usually only resolved through the assistance of others, usually family or members of the local community. There is a strong implication in the drama that in families where there is no cooperation between parents (such as single-mother households), raising a child is more difficult and leads to instability and discord within the family. Further, single-motherhood is seen as something shameful and to be pitied. A supporting character is so embarrassed at having been abandoned by her husband for another woman that she creates the façade of being the perfect mother and having the perfect home life; whenever anyone asks about her husband, she claims he is away on business. In her zeal to portray the perfect image of a diligent housewife and devoted mother, she comes across as overbearing and critical, and many of the other characters become wary of her. Unfortunately, her lies are exposed in a humiliating fashion, when her husband fails to turn up for an important family event. While the tone of the drama is sympathetic, the message seems to be that the two-parent family is ideal, and a woman left to bring up a child on her own should be pitied rather than admired.

This message is reinforced in the highly controversial yet popular drama *14-Year-Old Mother* (2006). With its attention-grabbing title, which recalled a similar storyline in the first series of the popular, school drama, *Kinpachi Sensei* (*Sannen B-gumi Kinpachi sensei*, 1979–80), *14-Year-Old Mother* seemed to offer the promise of a radically progressive view

[47] Total number of births per woman aged 15–49 in 2005 according to the *Heisei 18-nen jinko dotai chosa* [A Survey of Population Trends, 2006]: http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/kakutei06/hyo5.html (accessed 25.06.2013).

[48] To cite one of many examples, in 2002, Diet member Matsuzaki Kimiaki complained that feminism had gone too far in promoting work over motherhood: http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/cgi-bin/KENSAKU/swk_dispdoc.cgi?SESSION=13976&SAVED_RID=3&PAGE=0&POS=0&TOTAL=0&SRV_ID=8&DOC_ID=5877&DPAGE=1&DTOTAL=1&DPOS=1&SORT_DIR=1&SORT_TYPE=0&MODE=1&DMY=22376 (accessed 28.06.2013).

[49] Articles linking child abuse to the loss of maternal instinct include: 'Ikuji wo houki suru hahatachi: issai no joji ga gashi' [Mothers Who Abandon Childrearing: 1-year-old Girl Starves to Heath], AERA, May 31, 1999, available from Kikuzou II Visual database (accessed 28.06.2013).

[50] *At Home Dad* aired on Fuji TV from April-June 2004 in 10 parts, followed by a 1″-hour special in September 2004: http://www.fujitv.co.jp/b_hp/dad/ (accessed 20.08.2013).

of teenage sex and single motherhood. However, compared with *Kinpachi Sensei*, which was seen as radical in its day, *14-Year-Old Mother* was fairly conservative and did little to challenge patriarchal notions of family and gender stereotype.

The first series of *Kinpachi Sensei*[51] featured a storyline under the title "15-Year-Old Mother" (note the similarity to the title of the 2006 drama) about a junior high school student who becomes pregnant by a classmate and eventually decides to proceed with the pregnancy and raise the child herself, despite parental opposition. She is supported by her teacher, the eponymous hero Kinpachi Sensei, but her father, a strict authoritarian with extremely conservative views, cannot accept his daughter's digression and cuts all ties with her and his grandchild. The domineering patriarch is eventually overruled by his formerly submissive wife following the death of their son, who committed suicide after learning he had failed to gain entrance to a prestigious university, contrary to the father's high expectations. In his attempt to wield ultimate authority and preserve the reputation of the family, the father has in fact broken the family apart. It is up to the mother to rebuild the family by accepting her daughter and grandchild back into the household. In its opening series, this drama managed to tackle several controversial themes, including teenage sex, pregnancy, Japan's pressure-cooker education system and the challenging of patriarchal authority.

14-Year-Old Mother, on the other hand, does very little to challenge conservative views of family and motherhood. Although this drama appears on the surface to be offering a rather radical perspective on motherhood in its positive representation of a teenage, unmarried mother, in fact, its overall message seems to support the traditional, two-parent family norm. Further, its idealization of motherhood as a 'natural' experience that enables a young girl to mature to womanhood, and its promotion of the concept that even a young girl can possess an innate maternal instinct, supports the patriarchal stereotype that confines a woman's role to the domestic sphere.

14-Year-Old Mother, an 11-part series, was broadcast on NTV on Wednesday nights from October to December 2006.[52] The protagonist, Miki,[53] a 14-year-old student at an exclusive private girls' junior high school, is portrayed as the ideal daughter of a typical, suburban, middle-class family. She is good-natured, spirited and full of hope. She uses her school radio show to impart inspirational messages to her peers every morning and, in the opening episode, she falls into a river attempting to rescue a puppy. The opening credits of the drama show a bright, blue, cloudless sky and there are several scenes of Miki looking up at such a sky throughout the series, presumably meant to evoke feelings of hope and optimism. She even names her daughter Sora, or sky. Miki is a 'good', innocent girl, whose one lapse, becoming pregnant at 14, happens as a result of the first (and only) time she has sex with her 15-year-old boyfriend, Satoshi. Of course, the act itself is never shown, but the circumstances leading to it are portrayed in a dramatic, romanticized way; they are not two hormone-driven teenagers but a couple in love, who are helplessly drawn to each other.

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[51] The first series of *Kinpachi Sensei* aired on TBS from October 1979 to March 1980 in 23 parts. There have been eight series (and 11 specials) in total, the final episode airing in 2011: http://www.tbs.co.jp/kinpachi/ (accessed 20.06.2013).

[52] *14-Year-Old Mother* official website: http://www.ntv.co.jp/14/ (accessed 20.08.2013).

[53] In this paper, I refer to characters by the names they are most commonly referred to within the drama they appear in.

In the depiction of Miki, we can see a very traditional stereotype of gender roles being promoted. There is a strong suggestion in the drama that women should take the primary role in raising a child. Miki regards raising her child to be her responsibility alone. Even though still a child herself, she believes it is her duty, as the mother, to care for her child and asks nothing from the father of the baby. In the mold of many television drama heroines (see *Oshin*)[54] before her, Miki is portrayed as self-sacrificing and willing to endure anything for the sake of her child. Despite the medical risks of childbirth, the disruption to her education and future career prospects, the difficulties of raising a child as a single parent and the social stigma, she decides to proceed with the pregnancy. It is a strong maternal instinct (*bosei honnō*), which seems to develop almost as soon as Miki discovers she is pregnant, that drives her to become a mother in spite of all the obstacles in her way. This bond with her unborn baby grows stronger as the pregnancy advances, and is heightened after her premature birth, during which the lives of both mother and baby are put at risk.

The instinct to protect and nurture is presented as a natural phenomenon in women, echoed in the tagline of the drama: "Born to love" (*Ai suru tame ni umarete kita*). This concept is reaffirmed in the portrayal of the close relationship between Miki and her own mother, who is supportive of her daughter. Several episodes feature scenes where the thoughts of mother and daughter are narrated by the respective characters retrospectively, as though they are remembering the events portrayed on screen from some future point in time. The narration of these thoughts over the action forms a 'telepathic conversation' between mother and daughter, emphasizing the strong bond between the two characters. Interestingly, there is no mention of a 'paternal instinct' and Miki's boyfriend, Satoshi, refuses to take any responsibility for the situation until the very last episode. Although Miki's reluctance to apportion any responsibility to him is challenged by other characters, including her father, her stance is idealized as noble and admirable.

Furthermore, the emphasis on Miki's warm, supportive, two-parent family, when contrasted with the unhappiness of Satoshi, who has been brought up by a workaholic single-mother, reinforces the notion that mothers should really devote most of their energies to their children in order to create a stable and happy family environment, ideally with two parents involved. While Miki's mother is depicted as a supportive and caring woman, who prioritizes her role at home as mother and housewife, Satoshi's mother is depicted as a cold and heartless woman, who puts her reputation as a successful business woman before the welfare of her son. As Miki's pregnancy advances, her mother quits her part-time job as a waitress to help prepare for the impending birth. During Miki's hospitalization, her family – parents, brother, uncle and aunt – all visit to offer their support. Meanwhile, Satoshi's mother pays the price for putting business before family: she suffers the humiliation of her son's digression being publicly exposed in the media and her business collapses as a result, forcing her to go into hiding to escape her creditors. Whereas Miki's family have each other for support during this difficult time, Satoshi and his mother, who had prided herself on being independent and self-sufficient, now find themselves in a desperate

[54] Paul A. S. Harvey, 'Interpreting *Oshin* – War, History and Women in Modern Japan, in *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, Lisa Skov & Brian Moeran (eds.), Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995, pp. 75–110.

situation with no-one to turn to. Eventually they are forced to flee their luxury, two-story home for a small, dingy apartment in a run-down part of the city.

In the final episode, this message is further compounded by the announcement by the teenage couple of their intention to marry, as soon as they are old enough. Thus, Miki's one aberration, to have underage sex and fall pregnant, can be excused as the actions of a girl in love and neatly swept under the carpet. Rather than challenge social norms, *14-Year-Old Mother* actually conforms to the traditional narrative of marriage and the two-parent family ideal.

Rejecting men: The rise of the matriarchy in contemporary drama

The concept of maternal instinct as a strong motivating force for women has continued to feature in more recent dramas dealing with motherhood, including *Mother* (2010), which ran with the tagline "motherhood drives women crazy" (*bosei wa josei o kuruwaseru*).[55] However, while these dramas continue to make a strong association between women and the maternal role, these new dramas distinguish themselves from the home dramas of the 1970s, which featured idealized 'reliable mothers', by actively challenging traditional patriarchal structures. Unlike the dramas of the 1970s and 1980s, newer dramas, such as *Mother* and *Single Mothers* (2012), stand out for featuring almost entirely female casts, with only a handful of male characters in supporting roles. The female characters in these dramas are building their own family structures and support networks, consisting only of women. These dramas emphasize the strength of women when they are united and pointedly dismiss men as unreliable, unstable and unnecessary in any aspect of their lives.

This point is most acutely demonstrated in *Mother*. The drama centers on an elementary school teacher, Nao, a single woman in her thirties, who kidnaps a young girl, Rena, to save her from an abusive home. In order to escape the authorities, Nao returns to her family home in Tokyo with Rena, whom she passes off as her own child. Nao's family, which consists of her divorced, adoptive mother and two unmarried sisters, eventually agrees to help the runaways and protect them even after the truth is discovered. Even Nao's birth mother makes an appearance in the drama and joins forces with the other women to protect Nao and Rena, despite the fact that she is dying of cancer. Although there are many differences between the women, not only are they eventually able to put these aside in order to help each other when necessary, these experiences help them to form close bonds with each other. As well as helping Nao and Rena evade the authorities for as long as possible, the women support Nao's birth mother through her illness and Nao's sister Mei, who is heavily pregnant, eventually turns to her mother (and not her fiancé) for support when she discovers her unborn baby has a disability.

In contrast, the few male characters that appear regularly in *Mother* are mostly depicted as abusive, obstructive or simply uncaring. Rena's mother's boyfriend is portrayed as a dark, sullen, young man who abuses the six-year-old both physically and emotionally. Most of the scenes he appears in are set at night, in dark rooms, where he is either playing video games or drinking, almost always with a gloomy expression on his face. Other male characters include a journalist who tries to discover the truth behind Nao and Rena's

[55] *Mother* aired on NTV in 11 parts, from April-June 2010: http://www.ntv.co.jp/mother/index.html (accessed 20.08.2013).

disappearance and seems intent on exposing their secret, and Mei's fiancé, who is portrayed as a cold, brusque man from a conservative family, who, until the final episode, seems to care more for his reputation than he does for Mei and their baby. These men are portrayed as isolated loners, unable to understand or benefit from the close bonds and feelings of solidarity that develop between the women. This point is most adeptly demonstrated in a scene near the end of the series, where all the women, having bonded over their many struggles, get together to have a family photo taken. The two men who happen to be with them, quietly leave the room while the women have the photo taken. As one remarks to the other, their presence "doesn't feel necessary".

In a similar vein, the NHK drama *Single Mothers*[56] also emphasizes female solidarity by focusing on a mostly female cast, with very few male characters. All the main female characters are members of a single mothers' group which advocates for better rights and treatment of single mothers, and supports individual single mothers in finding employment and further education. Through this network, the main protagonist, a former housewife with a young son escaping a violent husband, is able to find a new place to live, receive advice about welfare payments, training and employment, as well as emotional support and friendship. The group welcomes single mothers from different backgrounds and circumstances, including divorcees, unmarried mothers and widows, from teenagers to women in their fifties, suggesting that whatever their differences, all single mothers are equal in their aims to forge better lives for themselves and their children. Together, the women support each other and work together to successfully lobby the government to back down in its attempt to curb welfare payments to single mothers. These women, many of whom are outside the normal social structures centered on extended family and workplaces, build their own social network, based on play dates and shared meals.

In contrast to the stability and support offered by the women, the two supporting male characters, both husbands who have been left by their wives, represent instability and aggression. The husband of the main protagonist is depicted as harsh and exacting, quickly losing his temper and turning violent when his strict demands are not met. Often we see him sitting alone in a dark room, his face set in a terrifying grimace. The other husband approaches the single mothers' group for help in understanding why his wife left him. Initially, the women are sympathetic and accept him into their group; however later in the series, still anguished by the continuing separation from his wife and children, he explodes in a sudden rage and is told must leave.

The independent single mother as a new role model for modern women

Alongside these strong, matriarchal figures, who have banished men from their lives, another type of single mother heroine has also emerged. In contrast to the 'suffering woman' of the 1970s, this type of woman finds success in male spheres of influence, such as the legal profession or law enforcement, not by acquiescing to men but through sheer stubbornness. The protagonists of dramas such as *Magerarenai Onna* (The Unbending Woman, 2010) and *Dirty Mama!* (2012) refuse to conform to traditional stereotypes of femininity, being brutally honest, strong-willed and even ruthless at times. Fiercely

[56] *Single Mothers* aired on NHK in eight parts, from October–December 1012: http://www.nhk.or.jp/drama10/sinmama/ (accessed 20.08.2013).

independent, these women are dedicated only to their careers and their children, and manage to succeed in both roles without compromising either.

The main protagonist of *The Unbending Woman*[57] is a single woman in her early thirties, intent on passing the bar exams so she can fulfil her dream of becoming a lawyer. Despite failing the exam 10 times, Saki is unfaltering in her dedication, spending night after night studying alone in her apartment. She does not have a wide network of friends and family to offer support and comfort; rather she is portrayed as an awkward loner with a brusque, straightforward manner that makes it difficult for her to get along with others in a society that generally disapproves of directness, especially in women. However, Saki is determined not to 'go with the flow' like other women of her age, which would include marriage and family, but to forge her own path. Each time her long-suffering boyfriend proposes marriage, she rebuffs him, saying marriage "is not necessary" for her. When she discovers she is pregnant, instead of choosing between career and motherhood, she decides she will take on both, defying the people (and society) who seem to believe this is not possible.

Initially, Saki is viewed by her few friends as a somewhat hapless character who needs the advice of others to get her life on track. Her married friend Riko is one of those trying to help. However, despite presenting the façade of a happy housewife, Riko's life is far removed from marital bliss. As Riko openly admits, she is the "world's best liar", buying designer goods to compensate for the fact that, when she returns to her luxury, two-story home, she is ignored by her cheating husband and her distant children. The contrast between 'honest' single Saki and 'lying' married Riko is used to undermine the widespread assumption that marriage automatically leads to happiness. Although Saki is alone, it is Riko who is lonely. Eventually, Riko comes to admire Saki for being true to herself and her beliefs. Inspired by Saki's determination and resolve, Riko decides she can no longer live a lie, and leaves her family to become a single mother, embarking on a new vocation as a carer in a nursing home.

Dirty Mama!, a comedy drama set in a central Tokyo police station, is even more progressive in its depiction of women breaking barriers in the workplace.[58] The two central protagonists of the drama, Maruoka Takako, and her subordinate, Nagashima Aoi, are the only two female detectives in their department. Furthermore, Maruoka,[59] the 'dirty mama' of the title, has successfully managed to combine her career (she has the highest success rate for solving cases in her department) and her role as the single mother of a one-year-old boy, Hashizō. However, far from living up to the idealized image of the warm, kindly and self-sacrificing mother, Maruoka is a tough, stubborn and disagreeable woman, notoriously difficult to work with, often infuriating her partners with her exacting demands and her refusal to follow the rules. She constantly uses impolite language and makes condescending remarks about her colleagues, and is willing to do whatever it takes to solve a crime, even

[57] *The Unbending Woman* aired on NTV in 10 parts, from January–March 2010: http://www.ntv.co.jp/mage/ (accessed 20.08.2013).

[58] *Dirty Mama!* was broadcast on NTV from January to March 2012 in ten parts: http://www.ntv.co.jp/dirtymama/index.html (accessed 20.08.2013).

[59] Unlike the characters in other dramas I have discussed in this paper, Maruoka and Nagashima are mostly depicted in work situations and, therefore, are most commonly referred to by their family names.

if this means taking bribes or torturing suspects until they confess. Her attitude to life is summed up in a revised version of 'The Tortoise and the Hare' story she has written for Hashizō. In Maruoka's version, after having napped during his race against the tortoise, the hare catches up to the tortoise, violently twists his neck and crosses the line first. In her world, ruthlessness, not fairness, is a requisite for success in life.

Although *Dirty Mama!* purports to be a detective drama, each episode structured around a case that must be solved by the end of the hour-long episode (except for the first two episodes, which form a two-parter), this construct is merely a device used by the drama to promote Maruoka's uncompromising world view. First and foremost, Maruoka believes in being true to herself. As she puts it, "I don't believe in rules made by others. I use the methods I believe in because I don't want to lie to myself". She feels justified in employing illegal methods in her investigations because she is acting for the greater good. If she can catch the criminal (which she always does), the ends justify the means. She also refuses to conform to accepted norms regarding childrearing by having Hashizō accompany her while she is on duty. Despite repeated criticism from colleagues and wider society that she is being an irresponsible mother by putting her baby's life at risk, she insists that the safest place for him is by her side. While recognizing that Maruoka's way of life is unconventional, the narrative of the drama supports her approach: her work does not suffer and Hashizō is a happy, well-looked after baby. Both as a detective and a mother, she eventually earns the respect of those around her.

Maruoka is also fiercely independent. Several times during the series, she reiterates her belief that essentially, humans are on their own (*ningen no kihon wa hitori*) and should not rely on others. She is particularly critical of women who blackmail men into relationships, rejecting the idea that women need men to protect them. Her colleagues, in particular Nagashima, disagree with her; they have all formed close partnerships with their 'buddies', and worry Maruoka will end up lonely. However, Maruoka insists she has no interest in forming bonds or having a 'buddy', in her opinion, such relationships are a hindrance to the work of a detective. Maruoka's sobering viewpoint is vindicated when Nagashima is shot by her former 'buddy', a teammate from her old softball team. While Nagashima has fond memories of her friendship with her former teammate, whom she sees as inspirational, the teammate has harbored a grudge towards Nagashima, whose injury prevented their team from going to the Olympic Games. Ultimately, Nagashima's 'belief' in her former 'buddy' is found to be misplaced, and not only compromises her ability as a detective (it does not occur to her to suspect her former friend of a murder she is investigating) but also endangers her life. This rejection of the 'buddy' convention can be seen as an indirect criticism of marriage – the most conventional partnership. Just as *The Unbending Woman* shattered the illusion of marital bliss, *Dirty Mama!* undermines the assumption that marriage automatically equals happiness by repeatedly questioning its necessity in a woman's life. Early in the series, Maruoka asks, "Is marriage so happy?" The 'will-they-won't-they' question mark that hovers over Nagashima's relationship with her boyfriend reflects the hesitation many women feel regarding marriage in modern Japan.

While offering a representation of a strong, successful, working, single mother, *Dirty Mama!* does not ignore the barriers and discrimination Japanese women, in particular single women, face in trying to combine a career with motherhood. Several times during the series, Maruoka is asked, "Isn't it difficult to work and raise a child on your own?" Maruoka

alludes to the difficulties herself in the opening episode, explaining one of the reasons for bringing her son to work is the high cost of childcare. According to Nagashima, who faces a dilemma when she discovers that she is to become a mother herself, Maruoka is an exception – most women are not able to manage a career and family life. Twenty-eight years have passed since the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Laws in 1986, which promised equal opportunities for men and women in the workplace, yet still, the notion that women must choose between family and work persists. When a professional photographer describes having an abortion in order to continue her career, Nagashima expresses sympathy. Furthermore, the expectation is that, given a choice, women should prioritize marriage and family. This is demonstrated when Nagashima's male colleagues learn her boyfriend has proposed to her. They automatically assume she will resign from work and attempt to install a man (her boyfriend) as her replacement. The dialogue of even sympathetic characters, such as Nagashima's boyfriend, can betray a casual sexism that persists in Japanese society. When describing Maruoka as a 'great' (*sugoi*) person, whom he admires very much, he qualifies this by adding, "even though she is a woman".

However, the fact that such chauvinistic attitudes are occasionally represented in the drama does not necessarily mean they are being promoted by it. When Nagashima first suspects she is pregnant, unwilling to give up her promotion (as her male colleagues would expect) she asks her boyfriend if he would consider becoming a house-husband. In fact, compared with the dramas of the 1980s that Muramatsu criticized for their bias towards gendered stereotypes, *Dirty Mama!* represents significant progress in terms of the representation of women. Although men outnumber women in the drama, the two central protagonists are both female and, even though it is detective drama, their roles are far from 'decorative'. They are pivotal characters, driving the plot and serving as the focus of dialogue and action. When a crime is committed, they are usually the first to rise to their feet, often leaving the men trailing in their wake. The women assume an authoritative tone when interrogating suspects and even in their conversations with male colleagues. They are often depicted in scenes of physical action: chasing and tackling criminals or holding them at gunpoint. There are even several opportunities for Nagashima to show off her skills as a softball pitcher.

Unlike the women in 1980s television dramas, women in *Dirty Mama!* (this is not limited to the two main characters) frequently appear in working environments and are never seen in the bedroom or the kitchen. It is men, rather than women, who are depicted as family-oriented and domesticated. Nagashima's boyfriend is keen to marry her and is described as having the perfect skills for being a house-husband – being kind and good at cooking and household chores. Further, male characters are often depicted as emotional or irrational. Many of the crimes investigated by Maruoka and Nagashima are committed by men who lose their sense of reason after being rejected by women or having to endure personal tragedies, such as the illness or death of a loved one. When confronted by the female detectives, they usually break down in tearful confessions.

That is not to say that the women never show emotion. Although Maruoka is normally emotionally restrained in her work, the few moments of tenderness she shares with Hashizō during the series demonstrate that, beneath her tough exterior is a warm, loving mother who dotes on her son. In several scenes we see her cuddle him, and she sheds tears of joy when she sees him stand for the first time. However, this emotional side to her is depicted

as a strength, not a weakness. When Hashizō is kidnapped by a criminal gang, Maruoka's anger and fierce determination to save her son are the driving force behind the eventual capture of the gang.

While emphasizing the ability of single women to raise children independently, *Dirty Mama!* does not allow fathers to escape responsibility in the way that *14-Year-Old Mother* did. Unlike 14-year-old Miki, Maruoka demands Hashizō's biological father acknowledge him legally and is prepared to take him to court when he refuses. Although she neither expects nor requests any financial contribution from Hashizō's father, she feels that every child should have at least some contact with their father, even a good-for-nothing (*rokudemonai*) liar. When compared with the martyr-like stance of Miki, this pragmatic approach perhaps more accurately reflects the position of real-life unmarried mothers, many of whom, while having accepted (or even choosing) their status as single mothers, still want some paternal involvement in the raising of their children. The reluctance of Hashizō's father to attend mediation highlights the tenuous legal position of many unmarried mothers in Japan.[60] The importance of a father is further emphasized in the relationship between Maruoka's superior, who is also a single parent, and his own teenage son. Initially, the boy is insolent and disrespectful to his father, insulting and even striking the older man, whom he sees as weak and incompetent. However, the father is eventually able to earn the respect of his son after saving him from the clutches of violent drug-dealers, and the two are reconciled.

Dramas such as *Dirty Mama!* and *The Unbending Woman* challenge traditional notions of motherhood by suggesting that, while motherhood is an important aspect of a woman's life, it does not have to be one's sole purpose. Further, they contest patriarchal concepts of gender and family with the message that women can be just as (or even more) capable than men, and that single motherhood is not a burden but can actually be empowering. We see this in the last scene of the final episode of *Dirty Mama!* Unsure about the future of her relationship with her boyfriend, Nagashima resolves, nevertheless, to become a 'strong mother' like her *sempai* Maruoka, with or without a man.

Rather, than conform to the stereotype of the cheerful 'reliable mother' or the tragic 'suffering woman', these new heroines are pragmatic about their circumstances; they are not blind to the realities of single motherhood, but are still determined to do the best they can. *Dirty Mama!* might be a light-hearted comedy, but it perhaps offers a more accurate representation of the realities of single motherhood in contemporary Japan than more serious dramas. Maruoka is neither saint nor sinner, just a mother trying to do the best she can for herself and her son.

A hopeful future for single-mother representations?

The last decade has seen much diversity in the way single motherhood is represented in television drama. On the surface, dramas such as *At Home Dad* and *14-Year-Old Mother* appear to promote unconventional families by presenting positive representations of men and women switching roles and making unconventional lifestyle choices. In actual fact, these dramas have served to reinforce the traditional stereotype of the 'two-parent ideal'

[60] For more information on the problematic issue of legal acknowledgement (*ninchi*) of illegitimate children by fathers, see Hertog, *Tough Choices…*, pp. 86–90.

by presenting families that conform to this type as much more desirable than single mother families.

By contrast, the dramas of the past three years have taken a more progressive approach in their depiction of single motherhood. Some dramas, such as *Mother* and *Single Mothers,* have continued to promote the rule of the mother, much like the home dramas of the 1970s. However, they differ from their 1970s counterparts in their complete rejection of traditional family structures. In these dramas, the empowering of women can only be achieved through the disempowering of men, who are weak and unnecessary figures in their lives.

Furthermore, we see the emergence of a new, strong-willed heroine, who refuses to compromise her principles in order to conform to social norms expected of women. The protagonists of *The Unbending Woman* and *Dirty Mama!* refuse to be confined to the domestic sphere, tied down by the patriarchal structure of marriage, or be made to choose between motherhood and a career. Maruoka, in particular, is able to embody a combination of physical, intellectual and moral authority with the warmth and affection of a loving mother, challenging and redefining the concept of the 'ideal' mother.

These new representations of single mothers are perhaps an indication of the social and demographic changes that are taking place in Japan today. Since 1975, the number of marriages has dropped by around 40 per cent, while the divorce rate has more than doubled.[61] If these trends continue, the number of single-parent families is likely to increase in the future. In the past, many single mothers chose to remain hidden, fearing social condemnation. However, as single mothers become more visible in society and on television, the negative perception of single motherhood that still exists in Japan is likely to wane. Further, positive representations of single mothers that do not conform to outdated, gender-based stereotypes not only influence attitudes towards single mothers, but towards all women who share many of the same dilemmas as single mothers. Although the image of a woman with a gun in one hand and a baby in the other (on the poster for *Dirty Mama!*) is used for dramatic effect, rather than to portray realism, it can be seen as a metaphor for the real juggling that all working mothers have to manage on a daily basis. Such dramas are powerful not because they draw distinctions between single mothers and other women, but because they are able to find common ground.

[61] Data collated from the *Heisei 23-nen jinkō dōtai tōkei* [Population Statistics, 2011]: http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/kakutei11/dl/04_h2–1.pdf (accessed 20.08.2013).

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