



Japanese Cultural Contexts and Gender Ideologies in Mieko Kawakami's *Chichi to Ran*: Literary Texts in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract. This study explores the intersections of Japanese cultural contexts and gender ideologies in Mieko Kawakami's novel *Chichi to Ran* (*Breasts and Eggs*), with a particular emphasis on its relevance in foreign language education. Kawakami's narrative interrogates dominant discourses surrounding motherhood, femininity, and reproductive technologies in contemporary Japan, while simultaneously foregrounding women's agency in resisting socially constructed gender roles. By analyzing the novel through a feminist literary framework, this research highlights how *Chichi to Ran* negotiates traditional ideologies such as *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) and challenges patriarchal assumptions about the female body. Furthermore, this paper argues that incorporating *Chichi to Ran* into foreign language education provides opportunities for critical engagement with issues of culture, identity, and gender beyond linguistic competence. Literature becomes a medium not only for language acquisition but also for fostering intercultural understanding, critical thinking, and sensitivity to gender dynamics. Through this approach, the study contributes to broader discussions on how literary texts can enrich language education by integrating cultural critique and social awareness.

Keywords: Japanese Literature; Gender Ideologies; Foreign Language Education; *Chichi to Ran*

1 Introduction

In the digital era, literary studies are no longer confined to the realm of aesthetics or entertainment but are increasingly recognized as tools for understanding identity, culture, and social dynamics. Literature functions as a medium for critical reflection, enabling readers to see how ideologies, particularly those related to gender, are constructed, negotiated, and resisted. As [12] argues, literature in language education operates as a third place, an intermediary space where learners can connect language with cultural and identity experiences. This becomes especially relevant in the context of foreign language education, as literature not only develops linguistic competence but also broadens intercultural awareness.

Mieko Kawakami's novel *Chichi to Ran* (Breasts and Eggs), which won the 138th Akutagawa Prize in 2008, stands as a significant text in the development of contemporary Japanese feminist literature [3, 10]. [10] addresses issues of women's bodies, social pressures concerning reproduction, and beauty ideologies institutionalized by patriarchal society [13, 23]. Her female characters grapple with identity dilemmas arising from the tension between personal freedom and cultural demands. Specifically, *Chichi to Ran* highlights how women's bodies are politicized, whether through the ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) [11], the cultural expectation of *onnarashisa* (true womanhood) [23], or the male gaze embedded in *dansei shakai* (patriarchal society) [14].

Several previous studies have examined *Chichi to Ran* in relation to body politics and reproductive justice. [3], for instance, emphasizes how Kawakami challenges patriarchal norms governing women's biological functions. [25] further argue that the novel creates space for discussing reproductive justice and women's agency in facing social pressures. In addition, [21] highlights the economic precarity tied to reproductive technologies, showing how fertility treatments in *Chichi to Ran* expose women to financial as well as emotional burdens. [9] and [17] also explored the pedagogical use of the novel in classroom contexts, showing how discussions around women's bodies can shift students' normative views.

However, most analyses remain centered on ideological, feminist, and political dimensions, while the pedagogical potential of this novel particularly in foreign language education remains underexplored. Yet, scholarship highlights that integrating literary texts rich in social issues can enhance language learning by cultivating critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, and gender awareness [7, 12]. Against this backdrop, this study pursues two main objectives. First, to analyze how *Chichi to Ran* represents Japanese cultural ideologies and critiques gender norms through the narratives of its female characters. Second, to explore how these representations can be utilized in foreign language education as a medium for critical cross-cultural reflection. In doing so, the study not only contributes to Japanese feminist literary scholarship but also offers new perspectives on integrating literature into language pedagogy.

This research is significant in two respects. Academically, it enriches Japanese feminist studies by highlighting the relationship between literature, women's bodies, and cultural ideologies. Practically, it demonstrates how novels can be used as teaching materials in foreign language education to foster critical awareness of gender and culture. This aligns with the demands of global education, which emphasize not only language proficiency but also intercultural competence and gender equity.

2 Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach utilizing textual analysis and cultural interpretation. The choice of a qualitative method is grounded in the study's objective, which emphasizes an in-depth understanding of the representation of cultural and gender

ideologies in Mieko Kawakami's *Chichi to Ran*. A qualitative approach is widely recognized as appropriate in literary and cultural studies since it allows researchers to explore meanings, symbols, and contextual relations in depth [5]. This approach enables the researcher to interpret the underlying meanings of the narrative and link them to the socio-cultural context of contemporary Japan as well as their relevance in foreign language education.

The primary data source of this study is the novel *Chichi to Ran* (Breasts and Eggs), first published in 2008 and awarded the Akutagawa Prize. Complementary to this, the study also employs secondary sources, including journal articles, books, and previous research addressing issues of women's bodies, gender ideologies, and literary pedagogy in foreign language education. These secondary sources serve to strengthen the interpretation and provide a more comprehensive conceptual framework.

Data were collected through a process of close reading, focusing on passages that address issues of body, gender, and cultural norms. Close reading is a fundamental method in literary research that emphasizes careful, detailed analysis of language, structure, and context [2]. Key quotations representing ideologies such as *ryōsai kenbo*, male gaze, *dansei shakai*, and *onnarashisa* were identified and categorized thematically. In addition, secondary literature was retrieved from academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and international journal portals to ensure that the analysis is theoretically well-grounded.

The data analysis was conducted through cultural interpretation, linking the text to gender ideologies within Japanese society. Cultural interpretation allows researchers to situate texts within broader socio-historical discourses and power relations [6, 8]. Each quotation was analyzed by considering the historical and socio-cultural context underlying the emergence of these ideologies. Subsequently, the analysis was extended by connecting the literary findings with the perspective of foreign language pedagogy, particularly how the text can be employed to foster critical reflection, intercultural discussion, and gender awareness in language classrooms.

3 Discussions

3.1 *Ryōsai Kenbo* (良妻賢母): Good Wife, Wise Mother

The ideology of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) emerged during the Meiji era as part of Japan's modernization project, positioning women as the moral and domestic backbone of the nation [11, 16, 24]. This ideology emphasized women's loyalty to their husbands, their role as caregivers, and their biological productivity as mothers. In *Chichi to Ran*, [10] critically engages with this cultural legacy. The protagonist explicitly voices her resistance to being reduced to reproductive functions.

しんどいのに、それがあるから女やってるってことになってる。それがあるから、赤ちゃんを産める。それがあるから、母親になれる。なれって言われる。なったらどうなるんか、わからんけど。私は子供を産む機械じゃない。 [10]

Shindoi noni, sore ga aru kara onna yatteru tte koto ni natte'ru. Sore ga aru kara, akachan o umeru. Sore ga aru kara, hahaoya ni nareru. Nare tte iwareru.

Nattara dō narun ka, wakaran kedo. Watashi wa kodomo o umu kikai janai.

Translation:

Even though it's exhausting, it is said that this is what makes us women.

Because of this, we can give birth to babies. Because of this, we can become mothers. We are told we must become one. I don't know what will happen if I do. **I am not a machine to give birth to children.**

The concept of ryōsai kenbo (良妻賢母 – good wife, wise mother) cannot be separated from the historical background of Japan during the Meiji era, when the nation underwent rapid modernization after the 1868 Restoration. As a state ideology, ryōsai kenbo was promoted through the educational system to define women's ideal roles: loyal to their husbands, responsible for raising children with national morality, and functioning as “biological machines” for the regeneration of the nation [11, 24]. In this framework, women were positioned simultaneously as symbols of domestic stability and as instruments of nation-building.

Although originating in the late nineteenth century, the legacy of ryōsai kenbo continues in modern Japanese society. As [11] points out, the concept became a form of “gender architecture” that normalized women's domestic roles even as Japan entered industrial and post-industrial phases. This ideology also resonates in contemporary discourses on housewives, family policies, and norms of femininity [16, 22].

In *Chichi to Ran*, Kawakami Mieko critically represents how women's bodies remain burdened by the legacy of ryōsai kenbo. The protagonist's statement “私は子供を産む機械じゃない (I am not a machine to give birth to children)” functions as a form of resistance against an ideology that reduces women solely to reproductive entities. Pedagogically, this statement can be utilized as a guided critical reading task in foreign language classrooms, encouraging students to analyze metaphorical language related to the female body and social obligation while reflecting on culturally embedded gender expectations. Through discussion and comparison with learners' own cultural contexts, such engagement supports both linguistic sensitivity and intercultural awareness.

Thus, the connection between *Chichi to Ran* and ryōsai kenbo underscores literature's role as a contested space in which gender ideologies are questioned, negotiated, and potentially rejected. This perspective is particularly relevant for rethinking the position of Japanese women at the intersection of history, culture, and modernity. In an educational context, this historical and cultural framing enables learners to examine how gender ideologies are institutionalized through social discourse and to critically assess the role of language in sustaining or challenging such norms. Building on this critique of domestic ideology, Kawakami further illustrates how women's bodies are framed and constrained by the male gaze and broader patriarchal structures.

Pedagogical Implications for Foreign Language Education

From a pedagogical standpoint, the analysis of *ryōsai kenbo* in *Chichi to Ran* demonstrates the novel's strong potential as a teaching resource in foreign language education. The text provides authentic linguistic input while simultaneously inviting learners to engage critically with culturally embedded gender ideologies. The protagonist's rejection of reproductive reduction offers a powerful narrative moment through which language learning can be integrated with critical cultural inquiry.

In terms of linguistic competence, *Chichi to Ran* exposes learners to expressive and embodied language that conveys emotional fatigue, social pressure, and resistance. Such passages allow students to analyze vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and pragmatic expressions related to the body, gender, and social obligation dimensions often underrepresented in conventional instructional materials. Literary texts therefore support contextualized language learning by illustrating how language operates within lived social experiences.

Moreover, the representation of *ryōsai kenbo* serves as an effective resource for developing intercultural awareness. By situating women's reproductive roles within Japan's historical and cultural framework, the novel enables learners to explore how gender norms are socially constructed and institutionalized. Classroom discussions grounded in literary narratives encourage students to compare Japanese gender ideologies with those in their own societies, fostering an understanding of culture as dynamic and contested rather than fixed.

Equally important, *Chichi to Ran* facilitates critical reflection on gender ideology in foreign language classrooms. The protagonist's resistance to being defined solely by motherhood invites learners to question the relationship between the female body, social expectations, and power structures. Through guided discussion or reflective writing, students can examine how literary narratives challenge dominant ideologies and articulate alternative forms of female agency. In this way, literature functions not merely as linguistic input but also as a medium for ethical reflection and social awareness.

Overall, *Chichi to Ran* exemplifies how contemporary literary texts can be pedagogically mobilized to integrate language learning with intercultural competence and gender consciousness. By engaging with the novel as both a linguistic and cultural artifact, learners develop communicative skills while cultivating critical literacy and cultural reflexivity key competencies in contemporary foreign language education [19, 20].

3.2 Otoko no shisen (男の視線) : Male Gaze and Dansei Shakai (男性社会): Patriarchal Society)

[14]'s seminal concept of the male gaze in film theory resonates strongly with Mieko Kawakami's literary representation of women's bodies. In *Chichi to Ran*, female subjectivity is repeatedly destabilized by the pervasive influence of male-centered perspectives embedded within *dansei shakai* (patriarchal society). Women's bodily experiences and desires are frequently interpreted not as autonomous expressions, but as phenomena that must be explained through the frameworks of male desire and patriarchal norms. One striking passage illustrates this tension:

自分が自分の胸を大きくしたいっていう願望に、なんで“男の視線”とか“男性社会”とかくっつけられないとあかんの？わたしはただ、今のこの小さい胸がいやなだけ。それってだめなん？ [10]

Jibun ga jibun no mune o ōkiku shitai tte iu ganbō ni, nande “otoko no shisen” toka “dansei shakai” toka kuttsukerarenai to akan no? Watashi wa tada, ima no kono chiisai mune ga iya na dake. Sore tte dame nan?

Translation:

Why does my desire to make my breasts bigger have to be tied to the ‘male gaze’ or ‘patriarchal society’? I just dislike having these small breasts as they are now. Is that so wrong?

Through this passage, the protagonist articulates her frustration at the inevitable association between her personal bodily desires and interpretive frameworks rooted in male dominance. Even an intimate and seemingly private choice is rendered socially and politically charged. This narrative moment underscores the difficulty of disentangling individual agencies from broader structures of gendered power.

[14] argues that women are frequently represented through the male gaze, positioned as objects of visual and sexual pleasure for male spectatorship. Kawakami’s protagonist challenges this reduction by insisting that her bodily desire should not automatically be read as a response to male expectations or patriarchal ideology. In doing so, the novel destabilizes the assumption that women’s bodies and desires exist primarily for male consumption. Pedagogically, this moment can be utilized as a guided critical reading task, enabling learners to examine how language encodes power relations and how personal desire is discursively framed within patriarchal contexts.

This critique is further illuminated by situating the passage within the broader context of *dansei shakai*, or patriarchal society in Japan. As scholars such as [18] and [23] observe, the Japanese social order shaped historically by the *ie* (patrilineal family system), workplace masculinities, and traditional gender expectations continues to regulate women’s choices, often subsuming personal autonomy under patriarchal norms. Kawakami’s narrative thus highlights how even intimate bodily decisions are burdened with cultural interpretations rooted in this patriarchal structure. In an educational context, this framing allows learners to explore how patriarchal discourse operates through everyday language and how gender norms are reproduced through social interpretation.

The tension between personal autonomy and social expectation in this passage also connects to the broader construct of *onnarashisa* (femininity), which disciplines women’s behavior and identity in daily life. Through her protagonist’s resistance, Kawakami exposes the subtle mechanisms through which femininity is regulated, not only by external male authority but also by internalized social norms. Literature thus becomes a critical site for interrogating how gendered subjectivities are formed, constrained, and contested.

Pedagogical Implications for Foreign Language Education

From a pedagogical perspective, this passage is particularly valuable for developing critical literacy in foreign language classrooms. By engaging with the protagonist's questioning of the male gaze, learners are encouraged to analyze how personal desires are often conflated with societal norms, especially within patriarchal frameworks. Such analysis supports students in recognizing the ideological dimensions embedded in everyday language use.

In terms of linguistic competence, the text allows students to examine rhetorical questions, evaluative expressions, and emotional language related to the body and self-perception. These linguistic features provide rich material for exploring pragmatic meaning and speaker stance, thereby enhancing learners' sensitivity to nuance beyond grammatical structure.

Moreover, the discussion of *dansei shakai* fosters intercultural awareness by inviting learners to compare Japanese gender norms with those in their own cultural contexts. Through guided discussion or reflective writing, students can assess whether similar mechanisms of interpretation and control operate in their societies. This comparative approach helps cultivate cultural reflexivity and gender awareness as integral components of foreign language education [4].

Overall, *Chichi to Ran* demonstrates how literary narratives can be pedagogically mobilized to integrate language learning with critical engagement with gender ideology. By examining the male gaze and patriarchal discourse through literary texts, learners develop not only communicative competence but also the ability to critically interpret cultural meanings embedded in language.

3.3 Onnarashisa (女らしさ): Femininity

The cultural construct of *onnarashisa* (true womanhood or femininity) imposes expectations of politeness, grace, nurturing, and domesticity on women. It not only prescribes a model of feminine behavior but also restricts women's freedom to define their own subjectivity. As [23] argues, *onnarashisa* operates as an ideological apparatus disciplining women's bodies and behaviors in accordance with patriarchal norms, functioning as a "gendered moral code" that confines women to predefined social roles. Similarly, [13] demonstrates how this construct is reinforced not only in domestic settings but also through political discourse, education, and media representations in modern Japan, ensuring the reproduction of normative femininity. Kawakami exposes the oppressive dimension of this ideology through her character's explicit defiance:

社会は私に『女らしく』あることを求めるけど、その枠に収まることは私の自由を奪うことになる。」 [10]

Shakai wa watashi ni "onnarashiku" aru koto o motomeru kedo, sono waku ni osamaru koto wa watashi no jiyū o ubau koto ni naru.

Translation:

Society expects me to be 'feminine,' but fitting into that frame would mean losing my freedom.

This statement reveals *onnarashisa* as a symbolic prison. While femininity is often romanticized as a collection of desirable traits, Kawakami redefines it as an ideological cage that deprives women of autonomy. In [1]'s terms, this dynamic exemplifies symbolic violence, whereby socially constructed gender norms are misrecognized as natural, inevitable, and even desirable. Through this narrative moment, Chichi to Ran critiques how cultural definitions of femininity sustain invisible forms of domination and constraint over women's lives.

At the same time, Kawakami's narrative foregrounds the tension between social expectation and personal freedom, illustrating how women are compelled to internalize *onnarashisa* even as it limits their agency. Pedagogically, this passage can be employed as a guided critical reading task that encourages learners to identify how evaluative language and normative expressions function to discipline gendered behavior within everyday discourse. Such analysis allows students to examine how language participates in the reproduction of cultural norms and power relations.

Pedagogical Implications for Foreign Language Education

From a pedagogical perspective, the concept of *onnarashisa* offers a particularly effective entry point for developing critical literacy in foreign language classrooms. By analyzing how femininity is linguistically and culturally constructed in Chichi to Ran, learners are encouraged to question the naturalization of gender norms and to recognize the ideological dimensions embedded in seemingly neutral expressions of politeness, morality, and propriety.

In terms of linguistic competence, the text enables students to examine modal expressions, evaluative vocabulary, and stance-taking language related to gender expectations and personal freedom. Such linguistic features provide rich material for understanding how attitudes, judgments, and social values are encoded in discourse, thereby enhancing learners' pragmatic awareness.

Moreover, discussions of *onnarashisa* foster intercultural awareness by inviting learners to compare Japanese constructions of femininity with those operating in their own cultural contexts. Through reflective discussion or short comparative writing tasks, students can explore how femininity is regulated, internalized, or resisted across societies. This process cultivates cultural reflexivity and deepens learners' understanding of gender as a socially constructed and historically contingent phenomenon.

Overall, Chichi to Ran demonstrates how literary narratives can be pedagogically mobilized to integrate language learning with critical engagement with gender ideology. By engaging with the concept of *onnarashisa* through literary texts, learners develop communicative competence alongside critical awareness of how language shapes, constrains, and potentially transforms gendered subjectivities in contemporary society [19, 20].

The discussion of *ryōsai kenbo*, *otoko no shisen* (male gaze), and *onnarashisa* in Chichi to Ran reveals how gender ideology in contemporary Japanese society operates through interconnected cultural, historical, and discursive mechanisms. These three

constructs function not as isolated concepts, but as a continuum of patriarchal regulation that shapes women's bodies, desires, and subjectivities. Through her female protagonist, Kawakami exposes how women are simultaneously positioned as reproductive subjects, objects of male-centered interpretation, and bearers of normative femininity, while also articulating moments of resistance against these constraints. Taken together, the analyses demonstrate literature's capacity to function as a critical space in which dominant gender ideologies are questioned and renegotiated. Kawakami's narrative foregrounds women's lived experiences and bodily awareness, challenging the naturalization of patriarchal norms embedded in everyday language and social expectations. By representing resistance at the levels of reproduction, desire, and femininity, *Chichi to Ran* offers a nuanced critique of how gendered power operates in modern Japanese society.

Taken together, the analyses demonstrate literature's capacity to function as a critical space in which dominant gender ideologies are questioned and renegotiated. Kawakami's narrative foregrounds women's lived experiences and bodily awareness, challenging the naturalization of patriarchal norms embedded in everyday language and social expectations. By representing resistance at the levels of reproduction, desire, and femininity, *Chichi to Ran* offers a nuanced critique of how gendered power operates in modern Japanese society.

From an educational perspective, this synthesis underscores the pedagogical value of literary texts in foreign language education. The novel enables learners to engage with authentic linguistic expressions while developing intercultural awareness and critical reflection on gender ideology. By integrating literary analysis with guided discussion, reflective writing, and cross-cultural comparison, foreign language classrooms can become spaces where language learning intersects with cultural critique and ethical reflection. In this way, *Chichi to Ran* exemplifies how contemporary literature can support the development of linguistic competence, intercultural sensitivity, and gender awareness key objectives of critical and socially grounded foreign language education.

4 Conclusion

This study has examined how *Chichi to Ran* by Mieko Kawakami articulates and critiques gender ideologies in contemporary Japanese society, particularly through the interrelated constructs of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother), *otoko no shisen* (male gaze), and *onnarashisa* (normative femininity). The analysis demonstrates that these ideologies function as overlapping mechanisms of patriarchal regulation that shape women's bodies, desires, and subjectivities, while also generating spaces of resistance articulated through female narrative voice and bodily awareness.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences, *Chichi to Ran* challenges the naturalization of reproductive expectations, male centered interpretations of female desire, and culturally prescribed femininity. Kawakami's narrative reveals how gender norms are embedded in everyday language and social discourse, and how women negotiate, resist, or redefine these norms within the constraints of patriarchal structures. In this sense,

the novel contributes to broader feminist debates on the body, agency, and subjectivity in modern Japanese literature.

From an educational perspective, this study highlights the potential of contemporary literary texts as pedagogical resources in foreign language education. The findings demonstrate that *Chichi to Ran* can be effectively employed to integrate linguistic development with intercultural awareness and critical reflection on gender ideology.

Through literature-based instruction, learners are not only exposed to authentic language use but are also encouraged to engage with cultural meanings and ethical questions embedded in discourse. Such an approach supports the development of critical literacy, cultural reflexivity, and gender awareness as integral components of foreign language learning.

Overall, this research underscores the value of literature as both a site of cultural critique and a pedagogical medium. By bridging literary analysis and foreign language education, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on how gender sensitive literary texts can enrich language classrooms and foster socially grounded, critical, and reflective learning practices.

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