Across the Nightingale Floor
Challenging the conceptions of gender

Mimoze Behrami
1. Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3
Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 4
The Tales of the Otori ......................................................................................................................... 6
Feminism and Gender Theory .......................................................................................................... 7
Relatedness ......................................................................................................................................... 16
The power of women ....................................................................................................................... 22
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 24
Works Cited ....................................................................................................................................... 25
Abstract

This essay deals with the protagonists’ challenges of the conceptions of gender in the novel *Across the Nightingale Floor*, by Australian author Gillian Rubinstein who uses the pseudonym Lian Hearn (2002). The protagonists are analyzed from a feminist and gender theoretical point of view, pinpointing the actions and thoughts that challenge the conceptions of gender in their society. Main focus is on Otori Takeo and Shirakawa Kaede, who defy the conceptions of femininity and masculinity within their sex, and how the characters gender identities change from the beginning to the end of the novel, and what causes these changes.
Introduction

Across the Nightingale Floor by Australian author Gillian Rubinstein, who uses the pseudonym Lian Hearn, was published in 2002. It is the first volume in the Tales of the Otori trilogy, which later turned into five books. The books are categorized in the Fantasy-genre, and are recommended to young teens as well as mature readers. The title of the first volume refers to the floor that Iida Sadamu, a powerful warlord in the book, has built in his home to be able to sleep without fear of assassination.

This first volume of the trilogy tells the story of a young man named Takeo and how his connections to two families affect his future in ways he never could have imagined. Takeo is raised in a nonviolent and relatively passive village in the mountains, and is taught to respect all living creatures and to despise violence. He does not have the ruthlessness of a warrior at all, and that is what is requested of him by the two families he later on becomes connected to.

Kaede is the daughter of a semi-powerful man from a higher social class. She was taught to fight and go horseback riding and does not fear death; she even thinks of it as glorious if done with “honor”, or by choice. Takeo, on the other hand, has a fear of dying young and before he has had time to fully live his life. The presentation of Kaede is one of a fragile character that is in no way self-reliant, which can be seen in the way that she has to simply follow the orders that men, and even women around her give her. There are examples of women in the book that have and display power in different ways. These women will be mentioned and compared to one another. Kaede becomes more self-reliant and independent as the events of the book progress, and she is even the one that eliminates her and Takeo’s mutual enemy Iida Sadamu, which was Takeo’s task from the beginning of the book.
The essay will focus primarily on the gender situations and issues apparent in the book. The aim is to distinguish their traits in the beginning of the book, assess them, and see how the characters transform and how they challenge the conceptions of gender in their society. This will be evident through their actions and thoughts as the book progresses. We will follow the development of Takeo and Kaede from beginning to end, as well as how they are portrayed in the beginning with features that are not particularly fixed to their respective genders from the aspect of what is acceptable in their society, and how they later change and become more traditionally female and male. To aid this analysis, Gender theory and Feminist theory will be used and incorporated into the analysis, with the issue of identity apparent for the main characters in the book.

The purpose of this essay is to argue from a gender theoretical perspective that the characters in Across the Nightingale Floor challenge the conceptions of gender in their society with their actions as well as individual developments of character. Primary focus will be put on the protagonists Otori Takeo’s and Shirakawa Kaede’s stories and the events that they are part of. The essay will begin with a general introduction to the book in order to aid the understanding of the main analysis, followed by a section of theory with examples from the novel relating to the arguments dealing with feminism and gender theory. It will then proceed with particular focus on Otori Takeo and Shirakawa Kaede and how they challenge the conceptions of gender, finally ending with an analysis of the power of women in general, as well as a conclusion that summarizes the essay.
The Tales of the Otori

In order to understand the essay and the analysis that will follow, it is important to understand the society that we are presented with in the novel. Therefore, this first section of the essay will be dedicated to explaining the novel on the most basic level. The novels in the Tales of the Otori trilogy all center on the power struggles between influential and powerful clans in the Three Countries; a fictive country in the novels that bears remarkable resemblance to a medieval, feudal Japan. The Clans are the Otori, the Tohan, the Seishuu, the Maruyama, the Shirakawa, and last but not least; the Tribe. The story line is predominantly centered on the Otori Clan, the clan that controls the middle of the Three Countries. It concerns itself in particular with Otori Takeo, the Otori Clan’s future headman, and Shirakawa Kaede, the heir to the Shirakawa and Seishuu Clans.

The Tribe is a secret organization in the world that Hearn has created. It is secret in the sense that not many people know of it, and even the most powerful lords do not know exactly who is a member and who is not. The Tribe itself is formed by five families that existed long before the Clans came into being, the two strongest and largest ones of which are the Kikuta family and the Muto family. Most of the knowledge on the Tribe was secretly accumulated by Otori Shigeru in his younger years (155). The members of the Tribe are often engaged in assassinations and work as spies for the highest bidding Clan in the Three Countries. They disguise themselves as merchants, actors, acrobats and traders in general, so as to not be recognized as members of the secret organization. They are respected and feared, largely because of the lack of knowledge about them.

The Maruyama Province is the only province in the Three Countries that is traditionally ruled by women. The current Lady Maruyama is Maruyama Naomi, lover and ally of Otori Shigeru. Lady Maruyama is one of the few women in the novel who is powerful
enough to be mentioned in this essay. Kaede Shirakawa, who will inherit the rule of her province, is another; as is Muto Shizuka, a powerful woman within the Tribe.

**Feminism and Gender Theory**

According to *Feminist Literary Theory*, written by Ellen Rooney (2006), a great deal of feminist criticism is interested in “examining the assumptions upon which fixed notions of gender (for instance, that women and men are naturally different) are based, and in its desire to work toward transforming these assumptions” (206). This is what will be examined in relation to *Across the Nightingale Floor*, where the protagonists, first and foremost, challenge the conceptions of gender in the society Hearn presents us with.

Rose Marie Hoffman concludes in her article “The Measurement of masculinity and Femininity: Historical Perspective and Implications for Counseling” that masculinity and femininity are socioculturally as well as psychologically constructed, and are hence going to change repeatedly. She argues that “theories and approaches that explore masculinity and femininity as representations of gender self-concept, gender identity, and gender self-confidence provide a different lens for viewing these elusive constructs and may expand our ability to embrace and develop our complete selves as women and men” (483). This means that, our views of ourselves, more than anything, make us feminine or masculine. For this reason, gender self-confidence and gender identity will be examined particularly closely regarding Kaede and Takeo. This will be done further down in the essay.

Patricia Waugh writes in *Literary Theory and Criticism – an Oxford guide* (2006) that the most prominent theme within feminism is the issue of essentialism, which deals with if there is actually an “innate and natural difference between men and women” (322). Essentialists argue that because women and men are different biologically, they must therefore be different emotionally and psychologically as well (322). They do not however
see this difference as something bad per se. It is something that should be embraced by women; the unique female identity. The identity in question is most often described as more “empathetic and co-operative, more connected to others, and more accepting of multiple viewpoints, unlike male identity, which is monolithic, authoritarian, and founded in a rationalist belief in one truth” (Waugh 323). In *Across the Nightingale Floor* both Kaede and Takeo are portrayed with traits that very much comply with the female identity described by Waugh, despite Takeo being a man. They are both compassionate, follow the commands of others in their lives, and are not demanding or dictatorial in any way.

R. W. Connell states in *Gender & Power* (1987) that it is indeed the global subordination of women to men that supplies the necessary basis for separation between men and women. Connell describes the compliance of women with this subordination, of them giving in and accommodating themselves to the interests and wishes of men, calling it ‘emphasized femininity’ (183). This can be seen in the novel with the example of Iida, and many of the other lords mentioned, where they have women who accommodate their every need and desire, physical as well as mental, thus excluding the women from positions of power of any sort.

Waugh refers to Kate Millett who wrote in *Sexual Politics* (1969) about the relationships between women and men, arguing that they must be comprehended as power structures that have severe implications in politics as well (Waugh 326). Millett developed the term “sexual politics”, and argued that patriarchal societies work “to inculcate male supremacy through a variety of covert means: politically, women have negligible representation; the biological sciences legitimize chauvinistic beliefs in female inferiority; and social systems – particularly the family – entrench political and social inequity in the private sphere” (326). Millett thus believed that women are subjected to an idea of the feminine that is purely artificial, and that the oppression of women was, to a great deal, secured by male
physical violence or cultural demands (326). In *Across the Nightingale Floor*, the society depicted is very much a patriarchal one where men are the ones who hold the power; they are the ones that struggle for it, engaging in battles and complicated alliances with other lords that they do not trust. In short, they secure land and power by means of violence of many sorts. Women are not particularly included in the power struggles; they are not seen as worthy enemies, believed to be too weak to make much of a difference in any case. In fact, the only woman who holds any significant official power at all is Lady Maruyama, and even she has had to play the political game very well to be able to survive and maintain her province. Women are used to obtain and maintain power at times, most often through marriages arranged to secure alliances, as in the case of Kaede. Lord Noguchi tells her that the marriage arranged for her is a great honor and that “it will seal the alliance between the Tohan and the Otori, and unite three ancient families” (84). This is also what Lord Iida Sadamu attempts to do with Lady Maruyama in order to secure her province as his own. Women are also used as hostages in order to prevent rebellion, as in the case of Kaede and her stay at the Noguchi residence. Further examples of this in the series come in the books following the first volume, and will not be discussed in this essay.

Maggie Humm states in *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (1994) that Millett also argued that patriarchal power, and the patriarchal society is reproduced in society through psychological circumstances in family situations. Male power saturates patriarchy, so there is no escape (Humm 44). From this, one could conclude that the situations in the book, with warlords being able to do anything they want because of the construction of society, are very difficult to escape, and that men will always dominate, seeing as they have been ruling for so long. “Power brings its own legitimacy” Shigeru says to Takeo, explaining that most people genuinely believe that warlords can do whatever they wish, just because they have secured their own piece of land (151). Inheritance of male power
is very common in the book, and can be seen in the case of Shigeru himself, who inherited his position from his father, and will then pass it on to his adoptive son, Takeo. The same theory is applicable to Lady Maruyama, even though she is a woman in power in a patriarchal society. She wishes for her daughter, or at least another female relative to inherit her province, rather than let it fall in Iida’s hands.

One of the perhaps most known feminists in history is Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir’s theories were very much influenced by existentialism, which rejects the idea of a specific “pre-ordered ‘human nature’” (Waugh 321), and puts more focus on every individual’s responsibility to be self-governing and create their own self. In *What is a Woman?*, Toril Moi refers to de Beauvoir who’s perhaps most famous words are that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (72). By these words de Beauvoir means that “woman” and “female” are not the same thing. Female would be the sex of the individual, and woman would be the feminine characteristics that they display. According to De Beauvoir “a woman is always becoming, always in the process of making herself what she is” (Moi 75). From this it can be gathered that Kaede is thus raised to be the woman that she is, supporting the argument that her views and opinions on everything are largely based on her upbringing, and the way she has been treated during her young years. This goes for all women in the novel, including Shizuka, who has had a completely different upbringing, being from the Tribe and having been trained to be an assassin from her childhood. Despite these differences in “becoming women”, they are feminine in their actions. They are all taught the art of making tea, embroidery, and even have a particular way of writing; the “women’s script” (81). Their female selves do not, however, exclude male characteristics from their behavior. Shizuka, particularly, is not afraid of embracing her more masculine characteristics, some of which are her fearlessness and lack of compassion when needed. This can be seen in her assistance in the assassination of Iida, where she boldly distracts the guards of his chambers,
and kills one of them by slitting his throat, before fending for herself when more guards come (273). It is not merely her actions that speak for her fearlessness, it is her belief in herself and her capabilities more than anything that inspire, as when she tells Takeo that he should go save Kaede from Iida and not worry about her, because “If there’s any trouble here, I’ll deal with it with Kenji” (269). She does not merely wait to be rescued by a man; she trusts her own abilities.

G. W. F. Hegel argued that “each conscious being enters into a struggle for recognition with every other conscious being, and each concludes that he or she is the essential subject (the ´self´), whilst all others are the inessential object (the ´other´)” (Waugh 321). Hegel believed that this is how we attain our individual sense of identity. De Beauvoir was of another opinion, and argued that women are always placed in the category of “the other sex”, next to men of course. This means that the man is always the ´self´ and the woman is always the ´other´. She also argued that ”women are always associated with the passive body and men with the active mind” (Waugh 321). This last idea has become rather central to literary criticism from a feminist point of view. It can also be connected to the attempted rape of Kaede by Iida, where the assumption was that she would just give into his wish, because of his superiority, rather than struggle against the injustice. It is also possible to connect this to the arranged marriages in the book, where women are not given the choice to say no, as with Kaede. Also, women are not the “brains” of the family in most cases, they merely follow the orders given by the headman. In the Noguchi residence for example, Lord Noguchi and his companions, all male, are the ones who assemble and decide Kaede’s fate. In Across the Nightingale Floor, women most often come into the picture when they serve food, bathe the men or do some other chores in the house. An example from the book is when Takeo is bathed and taken care of by Chiyo, Shigeru’s old house servant (28). Another example is when a girl who turns out to be from the Tribe does the same later, scrubbing Takeo’s back.
and massaging him, having already brought him tea, and dried his clothes that same day (190). Women are clearly depicted and considered as the ‘other’ in the novel, while men are the ‘self’.

According to Sigmund Freud, who supported his arguments about sexuality with the possession of the phallus/penis, “a man is a man because he possesses the phallus; a woman is, simply, not a man. Therefore, a woman is a lack, a negative. She lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity” (Waugh 321). Hence, it is the phallus that gives the man the “upper hand” in gender-related power struggles. This can also be seen in *Across the Nightingale Floor* in the attempted rape of Kaede, as she could be perceived as the object of a man’s desire, but not as an independent and individual self. The same could be applied to Lady Maruyama, who has been the object of desire for Iida for many years. Even there she is not considered as an autonomous self or an equal opponent, rather as an asset; an object to be conquered, partly because of her province, and partly because she is a beautiful woman. The conquest of women in *Across the Nightingale Floor* are somewhat based on fear of powerful and individual women, who do not desire nor need men who create their identity for them. For Iida, Lady Maruyama needs to be conquered partly because she is in fact her own self, an autonomous individual; beautiful in her essence, and partly because she owns an estate he wishes to make his own for power-related reasons.

Stephen M. Whitehead, who wrote *Men and Masculinities* (2002), refers to Freud, who believed that the phallic stage in childhood is the most important one in regards to developing a feminine or masculine personality (24). According to Whitehead, Freud also believed that men’s heterosexuality is what makes them perceive the female as the ‘other’, and “woman subsequently comes to occupy a fraught dualist identification/rejection within his subconscious: that of ‘whore/Madonna’” (25). Basically, Freud believed that adult males that are indeed masculine identify themselves in comparison to other men, and are fiercely
competitive with them, in particular when women are involved, as they try to gain their attention (25). This competitiveness can be seen in Across the Nightingale Floor in the cases of Shigeru, Iida, Takeo and more, as they try to gain the attention and love of the women they are attracted to and want for themselves. In a sense, one might suggest that in not succeeding to prove their own masculinity, as in Iida’s case with Lady Maruyama rejecting him, they become more eager to do so by other means, such as violence.

Whitehead also mention that Freud’s theories have been criticized by feminists, referring to Shulamith Firestone (1970) who argues that Freud does not acknowledge that the patriarchal societies that we live in have a great impact on the social construction of femininity, and that the formation of femininity is not all dependent on the phallus, or lack thereof (25). The society depicted in Hearn’s fictional work is a sort of imaginary Japan, with some people having unusual mental and physical powers, warlords, and the “common population”. Some things are valued higher than others, honor being one of them. And naturally, the expectations are different for women than for men, as in any society. Moi argues in What is a Woman? that feminists tend to distinguish between female and feminine, female being the sex of the individual, and feminine being the gender (37). She argues that feminist critics have “characterized women as relational, caring, and nurturing: as mumbling and incoherent” (109), and says that women and men are most often classified as either “‘gendered masculine’ or ‘gendered feminine’” (109). She argues that this distinction will only reinforce stereotypical gender performativity, and that people will feel the need to fit into one of these groups, rather than fitting themselves into the third group: the grey area that is feminine and masculine, as well as neither of them completely. Both Kaede and Takeo fit into the characterization of women mentioned by Moi, despite it being unusual for Takeo, since he is a man. How they fit into Moi’s classification will be examined in further detail later in the essay.
According to Hoffman, Borders and Hattie (2000) in “Reconceptualizing Femininity and Masculinity: From Gender Roles to Gender Self-Confidence” the labels “feminine” and “masculine” have been used to define and measure femininity and masculinity in character analyses in literature. These terms were used to define women and men as feminine and masculine by distinguishing certain traits, interests and qualities that were considered gender-specific. The authors refer to Spence and Sawin, describing gender identity as “a basic, existential conviction that one is male or female” (478), which according to the authors suggests that “gender identity refers to one’s sense of confidence in and comfort with being either male or female” (478). Kaede is not comfortable being a woman in the world she lives in, often feeling that she is being used by those surrounding her, and not feeling that she has any say in anything regarding her life, from the small matters like deciding what to eat every day, to big issues such as whom to marry. She despises men and what they stand for in her world, she is not envious of them, nor does she want to be one of them. This is very much a result of her childhood; not growing up in her own home but in the Noguchi residence as a hostage, being treated unfairly by everybody around her. Kaede does not know much about men in general, and the basis of her knowledge of men comes from the behavior the men in the Noguchi residence have exhibited. Based on her experiences with men, it is not difficult to understand why she is very suspicious of the opposite sex in general. She does not possess much knowledge about the world she lives in, partly because she is a woman, partly because of her class. Ladies of her class are, as previously stated, expected to act a certain way. For Kaede this means that she spends her free time sewing and engaging in household crafts, also entertaining herself with poetry and stories, as well as “learning to write in women’s script” (81), even here making a clear distinction between male and female writing.
Feeling superior would be something strange considering her position, and yet Kaede often indicates that she does indeed consider herself superior to others; she knows the value of her own life, and what she should expect from others when it comes to her. For example, she realizes that the first man Lord Noguchi elects for her to marry is beneath her and that “not only was he old – three times her age, married twice before, and physically repulsive to her – but she knew her own worth. The marriage was an insult to her family. She was being thrown away” (82). She talks of men as disgusting and vile, and believes that she would do better if she was in their position. An example of this is the scene where Lord Noguchi decides to send away one of his men, Daiichi Arai. Kaede feels that Lord Noguchi is a fool, and believes that she, in his position, would have made the better decision of making “sure that Arai stayed right here where I could keep an eye on him. Send him away and he’ll be in open revolt before a year has passed” (47). Kaede is in general not very positive in her thoughts of the world she lives in, often narrating her surroundings with dismay, belittling her own gender with beliefs of “what can women do in this world of men… what protection do we have? Can anyone look after me?” (46). Even her thoughts here demonstrate that she feels the need to be looked after and protected by a man, since a woman apparently cannot protect herself, or other women for that matter.

Takeo is very much comfortable with being a man; his problem lies in his feelings of not being able to control his surroundings. In the beginning this is because of his ignorance of the world around him. Later in the book, as he gains more knowledge, he realizes his part in the plans others make for themselves, and this is what makes him want to rebel. To his dismay, he cannot free himself of his metaphorical chains, without losing his honor and even his life through actions of disloyalty: disloyalty to the Otori Clan, and particularly disloyalty to the Tribe, who see him as a valuable possession, and would not hesitate to kill him if he did not honor his promise to join their Tribe (248).
Relatedness

Hegel’s theories about identity and the struggle for recognition relating to others can be compared to Ferdinand Saussure’s arguments about relatedness. Saussure argued that concepts cannot be understood in isolation; they should be examined as part of a bigger whole, in relation to something (Waugh 261, 411): a theory that can be applied to the analysis of the characters in *Across the Nightingale Floor*, where “man” can be defined by its relation to “woman”, or “male” to “female” if you will. From this aspect, one might suggest that the view of Kaede is one constructed in comparison to the character of Takeo. However, despite the arguments of relatedness that Saussure speaks of, a comparison between these two is not something that should be taken lightly, because they derive from different social classes and historical backgrounds, not to mention genders.

Instead, taking a look at Kaede in isolation, one can see that her gender identity is one constructed by others for her in a sense. She has a set of rules that she needs to comply with, regardless of how she feels about it. The fact that she has to marry a man she does not know, and, hence, cannot love, a man that Lord Noguchi elects for her, despite her obvious disgust and fear at the thought of marriage (82), proves this. Kaede does not have the option of turning down the marriage: her whole family is dependent on her and her actions, and the one she marries (85, 86). If she would reject Lord Noguchi’s request, her father and her family would lose their estate, which belongs to Lord Noguchi.

Marriage is an excellent example when it comes to analyzing the roles of women and men in the novel, and the expectations put on them by their class and gender. “Marriages are made for reasons of duty and alliance” Takeo says to Kaede (167). Despite, or more likely because of Kaede’s social class, she does not have the option of love, nor does Takeo after his adoption into the Otori clan. They are both aware of this fact; Kaede even says to Takeo that “love is not for our class” (167), acknowledging their mutual powerlessness when it comes to
the selection of a partner in life. And yet, they struggle against the expectations put on them by their society, fighting against their superiors. For there are superiors, and Kaede and Takeo are the tools used to gain power by the warlords. They both know this to be true, and are even told so by other people at times.

A friend tells Takeo that he is like a dog, and “useful to your masters” (185). This is something that Takeo spends a great deal of thought on later, realizing that:

I was useful to my masters: to Lord Shigeru, to Kenji, to the Tribe. I had been born with dark talents I did not ask for, yet I could not resist honing and testing them, and they had brought me to the place I was now. Without them I would surely be dead. With them I was drawn every day further into this world of lies, secrecy, and revenge. (185-186)

With these thoughts Takeo acknowledges his own hopelessness, pinpointing the people and abilities that are both his salvation and also his doom later on in the trilogy. He admits to both detesting them and being fascinated by them, not being able to resist using his special abilities. He cannot loathe them completely, because as he states in the second sentence of the quote, they brought him to where he is now; meaning they lead him to Kaede and Shigeru, as well as other people he loves. And yet, on the other hand, these talents that give him that love also take it away from him, because of the commitments and expectations that come with them.

However, there is another factor to consider: the expectations and limitations for people in this fictional world are dependent on their social status as well. For the people of higher status there comes a specific set of rules that need to be followed. There are more expectations on them, on men and women, and they do not often dictate their own lives. The stakes are higher for them as well, if they make a wrong move, they suffer for it with their lives, as Shigeru does in the end. Then we have the ordinary people, who are basically pawns
in the political games of others, with not much expected of them. And last but not least, we have the Tribe, that all have special abilities, both physical and mental. The Tribe consists of very skilled assassins, who make their own rules in this land. As a group they have a certain identity, but are very different from one another when you dissect and divide them into subgroups. The Tribe is presented as a population of many talents. Muto Kenji, an honorable member, says about his people that:

We can split ourselves and leave the second self behind. We can become invisible and move faster than eye can follow. Acuteness of vision and hearing are other traits. The Tribe have retained these abilities though dedication and hard training. And they are abilities that others in this warring country find useful, and pay highly for. Most members of the Tribe become spies or assassins at some stage in their life (69)

This speech is directed at Takeo, so that he understands his bloodline and where he comes from, as well as the demands that they will make on him. It also serves as a sort of warning to Otori Shigeru; Kenji is warning him that all of Takeo’s abilities are uncommon, and that the Tribe will claim him, be it sooner or later. But for that, Kenji needs to train Takeo into a warrior, because the Tribe does not advocate traits such as compassion or anything else that might be construed as a weakness.

A defining moment for Takeo’s core personality is when Kenji questions whether or not he used to kill insects just to see them suffer or not, asking him point blank “did you pull the shells off living snails, or tear the claws from crabs?” (67). Takeo responds that he did not, because his mother taught him that such actions were cruel. The compassion displayed here would usually be described as a more feminine trait in the book as well as by feminist critics (Moi 109), and combined with Takeo’s other characteristic traits; that he is humble, kind, quiet and so on, gives the impression of him being more feminine than
masculine in this world we are presented with, particularly when going back to Waugh’s depictions of typical feminine and masculine identities (323). Boys are expected to be crueler than girls, especially within the Tribe, and displays of compassion are not approved of. Even when Takeo kills a few people, because he does it out of compassion; Kenji berates him and his actions (191). He desperately tries to make Takeo more ruthless, so that he can fit into the role they all have selected for him, otherwise being of no use to anyone, telling him that “It’s a game” (78), something which Takeo does not believe matters, because it is a game that ends with someone’s death. Kenji even tries to make Shizuka teach him ruthlessness, seeing as she has so much of it, to which she replies that it is not an easy task, “you either have it, or not” (140). Compassion is considered a great weakness because it hinders your hand in battle, and what with many of the members of the Tribe being assassins, compassion only stands in the way of them doing their job. Kenji tells Takeo that his aversion to killing will someday be the death of him and that “the man whose life you spare will always hate you” (99), to which Takeo replies that the man’s death would benefit no one. As the book goes along, Takeo must start to present himself with more masculine traits. He trains in the arts of self-control, physical as well and mental, and learns of his supernatural abilities and is taught to become an assassin by Kenji: his first, but not last, teacher from the Tribe. The one thing that rids him of his compassion is revenge (99); for his murdered family in the village Mino and later for Shigeru, Kaede and many others. And it is not only his own desire for revenge that fuels him: it is that of Shigeru as well (79). It is also this need for revenge that turns him into less of a compassionate man later in the book, as when he kills many of Iida’s men when trying to save Shigeru (269).

Kaede is held hostage by Lord Noguchi, in order to keep her father, an overlord of lower rank than Lord Noguchi, in check. In the Noguchi-residence, Kaede is mocked, treated unjustly, and even molested by guards. Lord Noguchi tries to cement an alliance
between him and Lord Shirakawa by arranging a marriage for Kaede, something that goes terribly wrong when the man elected dies, and leaves Kaede with a horrible reputation; that desire for her leads to death. This is something that she must deal with throughout the book, as well as her beauty eliciting desire in men. Once again, the oppression of women comes across as a result of male physical violence (Waugh 326), as her reputation leads Kaede into dangerous situations, with powerful men desiring her. She describes this as them being enticed by her reputation and by “the idea that involvement with her brought death” (229). It is a way for men to assert themselves as powerful, in comparison to other men who have tried the same and failed.

In the book, beauty is something usually assessed more commonly when it comes to women, and is characteristically more feminine. But it is not described as a trait that makes a woman stronger as a person or more influential or anything of the sort. In Across the Nightingale Floor, Kaede is described and talked of as one of the most beautiful women in the Three Countries. But this beauty is what has led her into trouble in the first place. Lady Maruyama says that “even beauty is dangerous for women. Better not to be desired by men” (223), which can undoubtedly be seen in the case of Kaede, who would not be in danger of any sort if she were not considered as the most beautiful woman in the Three Countries and all powerful men wanted to use her for their own games.

Kaede takes on a stronger feminine role, masculine almost, in the end of the book, when she kills Iida Sadamu; the one Takeo was trained to assassinate by Shigeru and Kenji. Iida tries to rape Kaede, and instead of surrendering to his will simply because he is her overlord and a man, she uses a needle to hurt him, then steals his sword and kills him with it, just like Shizuka taught her to. Based on the society we are presented with: a sort of medieval Japan, one would not expect Kaede to fight Iida like she does. In Japanese society women were “restrained and disciplined by prescriptions of purity, chastity and naivety as well as
sexual segregation. Indeed, femininity was liked to passivity and submissiveness in relation to sexual desires, whereas masculinity was informed by ideologies of the mastering, controlling and moderating of sexual desires” (Kam Louie, Morris Low, Asian Masculinities – the meaning and practice of manhood in China and Japan, 8). In defying his rape, she challenges him and the conceptions of women and what would be the appropriate way for her to act in the situation she is presented with; submissively that is. Submission in this scenario would have been the cause of cultural oppression, as in the aforementioned quote; social oppression, because Iida is her superior. It would also have been gender-related, in that she is a woman, and Iida is a man, and so she is the passive body where he is the active mind, as Waugh argued (321).

In killing Iida, Kaede makes herself a target, simply because she is a woman. This is why Takeo takes the “blame” for it, having everyone believe that it was he, and not Kaede, who killed the dreaded warlord. Irene Claremont De Castillejo writes in Knowing woman: a feminine psychology that “without some form of heroism a man hardly feels himself to be a man. It is the hero in man that makes him really male” (46). In rescuing Kaede then, Takeo becomes more male in a sense. This is also something that occurs when he saves Shigeru from a slow and painful death by giving him an honorable painless one himself instead (272). It is interesting to see how the act of killing is merely acceptable if it deals with men, and not women doing the actual killing. That is, in the world that the common people live in, everyone from the non-influential villagers to the ruling class. When it comes to the Tribe and their people, however, it does not matter as much what sex you are, rather it is your gifts and talents that form your possibilities as an assassin. Shizuka, for example, is a woman, of not so high rank, and yet she proves herself not only able, but also willing, to do what is considered a “man’s job” in the society depicted in Across the Nightingale Floor, which has earned her a great deal of respect within the Tribe. Even Kenji refers to her when trying to
teach Takeo about ruthlessness, clearly respecting and admiring Shizuka’s talents. He sees her as a worthy opponent in a fight, telling Takeo that she is gifted with ruthlessness and that he should “stay on her right side” (140).

**The power of women**

Powerful women are not all too common in the book. There are only a few mentioned. Shizuka is one of them. But she has this power mostly in the reality of the Tribe, and not so much in official circumstances, or when the “ordinary people”, or peasants are present. Lady Maruyama is another woman of power. She owns the estate Maruyama, an estate that is traditionally inherited by women. But even in this case of female power, she has had to be very careful, and tells Kaede that she hides her power when she is among men, “or they will not hesitate to crush me” (121). She has had to hide it from Iida particularly, as he wants to seal an alliance with her by marriage: to her or to her daughter, who is one of the many women being held hostage to secure power for men by marriage. In the world that Hearn creates, one must be an excellent player of the political game in question, otherwise one loses quite rapidly.

Even though there are powerful women, however, they have not retained and secured that power without the help of men in their lives. Lady Maruyama has had an affair with Lord Shigeru for 9 years (118); Shizuka had her influential uncle Muto Kenji helping her. For Kaede, being dependent on a man is not something she wished for, and she did not think that she would ever love a man enough to trust him. Falling in love with Takeo, and realizing her own worth and power in being the heir to the Maruyama province, she understands that she needs an ally, and that Takeo would be the perfect one. When she comprehends that a life together with Takeo is not a possibility because of his allegiance to the Tribe, she is devastated.
The lovers’ farewell is a sad one, with tears being shed. Kaede tells Takeo that she needs him, and that she will never ask for anything more, if only he stays with her. In expressing her need for him she is both showing weakness, and incredible strength. A weak woman, in her position, would not have been able to express her need for another person, and would have tried to amplify her own independence instead. Kaede on the other hand, shows that she is not afraid to let herself be dependent on another person in that way, and thus proves that she believes in herself more than one would think considering her personality and experiences.

In eight years as a hostage I never asked anyone for anything. Iida Sadamu ordered me to kill myself: I did not plead with him. He was going to rape me: I did not beg for mercy. But I am asking you now: don’t leave me. I am begging you to marry me. I will never ask anyone for anything again (288)

Her weakness lies in her strength: the need for Takeo, a man. Kaede says that all she needs from Takeo is for him to marry her, and then she will not ask for anything else in her life. She even explicitly begs him to marry her, and says that he is the only man she feels safe with (289). Beauvoir argued that marriage is oppressive and that it “reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity. It perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she is happy” (Waugh 321) This means that Kaede is strong for being able to express her need for him, but also weak for actually having that need in the first place, and feeling that she has to be protected, instead of feeling safe in her own identity and trusting her ability to protect herself, much like Shizuka does.
Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to examine *Across the Nightingale Floor* from Feminist and Gender identity theoretical perspectives, in order to see how the characters in the book challenge the conceptions of gender in their society.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that Otori Takeo develops from a character of more traditionally feminine traits in the beginning of the book, to a traditionally male hero towards the end of it. Kaede goes from being considered a “weak” female, to a strong and more influential one, who creates her own fate.

The presentation of women in *Across the Nightingale Floor* is one of many types, as seen in the examples of Shirakawa Kaede, Lady Maruyama, and Muto Shizuka. The way that these women are portrayed in the events they participate in makes it clear that women have more power in the world presented by Hearn, than one would assume at first sight. Another conclusion that presents itself is that men have less power than expected, even though they appear to have the freedom of individuality and choice. Otori Shigeru, and Muto Kenji, as well as Otori Takeo are all men of power, and yet they do not control the circumstances they are met with, or even their own lives at times.
Works Cited


De Castillejo, Irene Claremont, *Knowing woman: a feminine psychology*, C. G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1973

Hearn, Lian, *Across the Nightingale Floor*, Lian Hearn Associates Pty Ltd, 2002


