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Paradox and Hope: Kenji Sawada, Superstar

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Abstract

Kenji Sawada, a Japanese pop culture icon, embodies a paradox. Early in his decades-long career, he sang songs with lyrics reflecting patriarchal gender norms. At the same time, he deliberately used multimodal semiotic resources at multiple levels to undermine the hegemonic masculinity expressed in those lyrics. In contrast, Sawada's recent songs convey his egalitarian gender ideologies and political views; having assumed full agency over his artistic production, he no longer needs to counter the effects of his lyrics with other semiotic resources. Using Kenji Sawada as a case in point, this article illustrates how individuals can deal with and negotiate a society's sexist norms and patterns, and construct a particular style through diverse multilevel, multimodal semiotic resources. The article also points to possible changes and increasing diversity in gender views in Japan, and argues that Sawada's current popularity represents a ray of hope in Japan's still patriarchal society.

Keywords

gender ideology – patriarchy – gender non-conformity – style – multilevel and multimodal semiotic resources – Kenji Sawada – lyrics

1 Introduction

Kenji Sawada, a singer, actor, and songwriter, is a superstar and pop culture icon in Japan. Born in 1948, he debuted as lead vocalist in a band called The Tigers in 1967 and released his first solo album in 1969.¹ Sawada's popularity was rivalled by none in the 1970s and 1980s. When he won the Japan Record Award Grand Prix in 1977, the highest televisual viewership rating of all time was recorded at 50.8% (Nakagawa, 2023: 455). Mari Yoshimura, the host of a popular TV music show, observed that when Sawada appeared on the show, other singers paled in comparison: "He was so cool, we couldn't handle it. [...] He was a true star and monster of Showa"² (Shimazaki, 2023: 239).³ Historian Yoko Kato (2023) described Sawada as "a superstar who changed the worldview of music and film in one fell swoop." In addition to his star aura and celebrated voice, Sawada was known for his striking physical beauty. Anthropologist Laura Miller (2006: 126) wrote, "with a distinctive face rendered rather androgynous with the aid of eye makeup, Sawada exhibited an external male beauty not commonly seen in mainstream media."

In the late 1980s, Sawada's popularity waned and he disappeared from television. However, he did not stop making or performing music. Since his debut solo album in 1969, he has released one or more albums every year (except for 1970) until 2018.⁴ His latest single was released in 2022. Sawada also goes on national concert tours every year. In 2025, as of this writing, he is scheduled to perform in thirty-six concerts (Sawada Kenji Ofisharu, n.d.). In other words, Sawada is still a prolific and active musician to this day. And recently, Sawada has been enjoying a renaissance. A seven-DVD set featuring his performances was released in 2021. The *Mainichi Newspaper* published an article titled "Reasons Why Kenji Sawada, Who Debuted as a Solo Singer 50 Years Ago, Is 'Trending' Again" (Yamada, 2021). In 2023 and 2024, three books chronicling his career were published (Nakagawa, 2023; Shimazaki, 2023; Tanaka, 2024). Tabloid magazine *Friday*, calling Sawada by his nickname, Jurī ('Julie'), reported that his concert tours were attracting sold-out crowds and proclaimed: *Ima "Jurī" ga atsui* 'Right now "Julie" is hot!' (Sasaki, 2024).

Sawada is relevant to our understanding of language and gender in contemporary Japan not because he is currently "trending," but because he epitomises

1 The Tigers disbanded in 1971. After that, Sawada belonged to another band, PYG, for a short time.

2 The Showa era, 1926–1989.

3 All Japanese quotations are translated by the author.

4 From 2009 to 2018, Sawada released mini-albums rather than full-length albums.

the paradox of Japanese views on gender, as well as hope for their evolution. In my analysis of Sawada, I examine lyrics, interview discourses, and other types of semiotic expression. Many of his songs are love songs, but, as Zettsu (2022: 10–11) observed:

Often, Japanese pop songs are perceived as having love as their main theme and are equated with so-called love songs. However, [...] one could say that they are gender songs. This is because the dynamics of pop songs/love songs are such that men and women engage in a kind of bargaining and try to determine each other's position in the relationship. [...] The lyrics of popular songs, sensitive to the atmosphere of the time, directly and indirectly record the changes in the collective (un)conscious regarding gender at that time.

Sawada's love/gender songs provide a window into Japanese views on gender in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as in contemporary Japan. As this article will show, drawing on Goffman's (1981) dissection of the role of a "speaker," Sawada primarily functioned as an *animator* rather than *author* or *principal* in the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast, more recently he has fulfilled all three of these speaker roles, and has acted as an agent of progressive gender ideologies. Throughout his career, he has taken agency through the construction of his desired styles, for which he has employed multilevel, multimodal semiotic resources (Okamoto, forthcoming).

2 "Men's Language" and Polyindexicality

So-called Japanese "men's language" is prominent in Sawada's songs. I am especially interested in expressions associated with "powerful or rugged masculinity" (Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2016: 240). As Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith (2016: 238–239) wrote in a discussion of what they proposed were "two (perhaps, overlapping) models of masculinity":

The first is the older model of rugged masculinity accompanied by forceful or rough language practices [...], and the second seems to correspond to a newer, gentler image of masculinity associated with language that is neither rough nor particularly indexical of physical prowess.

"Forceful or rough language practices" are what Nakamura (2007) called *kyū otoko kotoba* 'old-style men's language' (77). In contrast, the gentler "language

that is neither rough nor particularly indexical of physical prowess” corresponds to Nakamura’s *shin otoko kotoba* ‘new-style men’s language’ (74). For example, the first- and second-person pronoun pair *ore* and *omae* represents the old, rugged style while another pair, *boku* and *kimi*, represents the newer, gentler style (74).

The following linguistic forms represent elements of the rugged masculinity style.⁵

- (1) a. first-person pronoun *ore* and its plural versions⁶
- b. second-person pronouns *omae*, *temē*, *kisama*, and their plural versions
- c. utterance-final particles *zo*, *ze*, *ka yo*, *ya*, *na* (for eliciting agreement), *ka* (in plain interrogatives)
- d. plain imperative forms
- e. phonological form *ē* instead of *ai*, *ui*, and *oi* (e.g., *samē* ‘cold’ instead of the conventional form *samui*)
- f. auxiliary verbs such as *chimau* ‘end up doing’ and *yagaru* (for adding contempt)
- g. interjections such as *yō* ‘hey’ and *oi* ‘hey’
- h. lexical items such as *kū* ‘eat,’ *meshi* ‘meal,’ *ketsu* ‘ass,’ *abayō* ‘good-bye’

Although these forms have been described as “stereotypically strongly masculine forms” (Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2016: 240), they do not directly index gender (Ochs, 1992). Rather, the forms index the pragmatic meanings of roughness, harshness, or forcefulness, which in turn index rugged masculinity.

In addition, these linguistic forms index many other meanings: they are polyindexical (Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2016: 2). For example, Abe (2010: 45–47) reported that an employee of a lesbian bar used the first-person pronoun *ore* and the second-person pronoun *omē* when expressing strong emotions such as anger or frustration in an argument. Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith (2016: 279–280) also observed that female college students used direct imperative forms to communicate anger and criticism. In another context, Nakamura (2010) observed that a marketer of sexual services used *ore* to construct (homosocial) intimacy among men. Similarly, Abe (2010: 50) noted the use of the various utterance-ending forms shown in (1) “to create an

5 The linguistic forms in (1) are closely associated with (strong) masculinity in the standard variety of Japanese. However, speakers of other varieties may not have this association. For example, the first-person *ore* is not linked to masculinities in many regional dialects.

6 See Nakamura (this issue) for a discussion of various Japanese first-person pronouns.

intimate relationship among lesbians at the bars they frequent or to treat other lesbians as in-group members.” In yet another context, Miyazaki (2004) interpreted the use of *ore* by a female middle-school student as a reflection of her rebellion against social norms. Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith (2016: 242) also observed that films and TV dramas assigned the linguistic forms shown in (1) to “relatively young male characters portrayed as tough, rough, non-conformists, maverick, and/or rebellious.” Lastly, Okamoto (1995: 313) quoted a young woman saying that forms associated with roughness are *wakamono no kotoba* ‘the language of young people’ rather than men’s language. To summarise, many individuals identifying as female as well as those who identify as male use the linguistic forms shown in (1) as resources to express diverse meanings which vary depending on the context.

This situation represents the concept of polyindexicality (Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2016: 2), or of the indexical field, which Eckert (2008: 454) defined as a “constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of” a linguistic form. While Eckert illustrated the concept with individual linguistic forms, we can apply it more broadly, such as to the entire set of forms shown in (1). As mentioned, these forms index affective stances such as roughness, harshness, and forcefulness, which can be interpreted in different contexts to index one or more related meanings, including, among others, rugged masculinity, strong emotions, in-groupness, rebelliousness, and youthfulness.

Because the terms “men’s language” and “masculine forms” do not represent all the possible meanings indexed by the linguistic forms shown in (1), these labels are inappropriate. From here on, I will use the label “rough forms” to represent them.

3 Paradox: the Contradictory Presentations of Kenji Sawada in the 1970s and 1980s

3.1 *Rough Language, Gender Tropes, and Misogyny*

In the lyrics of Kenji Sawada’s songs, the following three pairs of first- and second-person pronouns figure prominently.⁷

- (2) a. boku – anata
- b. boku – kimi
- c. ore – omae

7 The first-person pronouns are sometimes not mentioned.

While the words of the third pair are among the rough forms, those of the first and second pairs are not. Ito (1993: 31–32) conjectured that the lyricists of many of Sawada's early solo songs assigned him the role of a younger man in love with an older woman. The first pair, *boku* and *anata*, appears frequently in these songs. For example, the 1973 hit song *Kiken na futari* 'Dangerous lovers' includes the verse in (3).

- (3) *boku ni wa dekinai*
mada aishiteru
anata wa otona no furi o shitemo wakareu tsumori

I (**boku**) can't do it
 I still love [you]
 Will **you** (**anata**) pretend to be an adult and break up [with me]?
 (Yasui, 1973)

Ito noted that this use of the second-person pronoun *anata*, along with the role of a younger man longing for an older woman, symbolised a man's desire to be the object of love and desire. *Anata* is more conventionally used in love songs by a woman addressing a romantic partner (usually a man) and connotes politeness towards the partner (Sumi, 2013: 29).⁸ Thus, at the beginning of his solo career, Sawada's songs deviated from a more traditional heterosexual model in which the man has the higher social status and is an agent (rather than an object) of love and desire.

However, after the 1977 mega hit *Katte ni shiyagare* 'Have it your way,' which won the Japan Record Award Grand Prix and made Sawada's position as a superstar unassailable, his production team seems to have pivoted away from the *boku-anata* pair and towards the *ore-omae* pair. Many of his hit songs in the late 1970s and early 1980s contain either the combination of *ore* and *omae* or *omae* alone. These songs include *Katte ni shiyagare* 'Have it your way' (1977), *Samurai* 'Warrior' (1978), *Ronrī urufu* 'Lonely wolf' (1979), *Tokio* 'Tokyo' (1980), *Sakaba de DABADA* 'DABADA at the bar' (1980), and *Sutorippā* 'Stripper' (1981), as well as two songs, *Omae ga paradaisu* 'You are paradise' (1980) and *Omae ni chekku in* 'Checking in with you' (1982), which even contain *omae* in the title.

Although *omae* can be used among individuals of equal status to indicate intimacy, especially in male homosocial contexts (SturtzSreetharan, 2009), in

8 *Anata* is also an old-fashioned term of address by a wife to a husband. *Anata* is not linked to politeness outside of marital/romantic/sexual contexts.

the heteronormative mainstream society of Japan, *omae* in love songs tends to be interpreted as referring to a female partner. When a man addresses a woman as *omae*, it takes on a condescending tone. In her analysis of Japanese romance novels, Shibamoto-Smith (2004: 124) observed, “*Omae* is an old-fashioned second-person pronoun and one with more condescending connotations than the competitor *kimi*.” Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith (2016: 242) associated *omae* “with sexist men’s usage toward women.”⁹ Thus, in the context of the romantic/(hetero)sexual relationships represented in Sawada’s songs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, listeners would be likely to interpret the use of *omae* as an expression of a man’s dominance over, as well as feeling of intimacy with, a woman.

In addition to *ore* and *omae*, the lyrics from this era of Sawada’s career contain numerous instances of other rough forms. For example, a number of them appear in the lyrics of the mega-hit *Katte ni shiyagare* ‘Have it your way’ (Aku, 1977), as shown in (4), where the rough forms are marked in bold.

- (4) *yappari omae wa deteiku n da na*
 [...] *semete sukoshi wa kakko tsukesasete kure*
neta furi shiteru ma ni deteitte kure
 [...] *abayō to sarari to okutte miru ka*

Sounds like **you** (*omae*) are leaving as I expected, **right?**

[...]

At least **let me put on a cool front**

Leave while I’m pretending to be asleep

[...]

I’ll just say **goodbye** (*abayō*) and send you on your way, **shouldn’t I?**

(Aku, 1977)

Line 1 contains *omae* as well as the utterance-final particle *na* ‘right?’, which elicits agreement in a rough manner. Lines 2 and 3 include the direct imperative forms *kakko tsuke sasete kure* ‘let me put on a cool front’ and *dete itte kure* ‘leave.’ Line 4 includes a casual and coarse-sounding goodbye, *abayō* (as opposed to a more conventional *sayonara*), and an utterance-final *ka* after a

9 SturtzSreetharan (2009: 268) reported that *omae*’s “full linguistic ideology as a deprecatory and aggressive second-person pronoun” can be exploited in man-to-man conversation as well.

plain form of a verb. As discussed in Section 2, the rough forms do not always index powerful or rugged masculinity. However, in the context of these songs that feature heterosexual relationships, the image of a coarse, forceful, and domineering masculinity figures prominently, especially when the rough forms occur with *ore* and/or *omae*. This image is reinforced by other elements in the lyrics, as discussed below.

Many of the lyrics in this period of Sawada's career were written by the well-known and prolific lyricist Yu Aku. Among the most famous songs Aku wrote for Sawada are *Toki no sugiyuku mama ni* 'As time goes by,' *Katte ni shiyagare* 'Have it your way,' *Samurai* 'Warrior,' *Dāringu* 'Darling,' *Nikumikirenai rokudenashi* 'Loathsome bastard,' and *Kasaburanka dandī* 'Casablanca dandy,' several of which depict stereotypical gender tropes and misogyny. For example, *Nikumikirenai rokudenashi* 'Loathsome bastard' presents a man who sleeps around and his (presumably heterosexual) partner who grudgingly accepts this behaviour and waits for him to settle down. *Kasaburanka dandī* 'Casablanca dandy' features a man's casual violence towards women, as shown in (5).

- (5) *kikiwake no nai onna no hoho o*
hitotsu futatsu haritaoshite
senaka o mukete tabako o sueba
sore de nani mo iu koto wa nai
 [...]
 shaberi ga sugiru onna no kuchi o
sameta kisu de fusaginagara
senaka no jippā tsumande orosu
hoka ni nani mo suru koto wa nai

A **woman** who disobeys me
 I'll slap her once or twice
 Then I'll turn my back and smoke a cigarette
 There's nothing else to say
 [...]
 I'll put my mouth on a **woman** who talks too much
 with a cold kiss
 I'll pinch the zipper on her back and pull it down
 There's nothing else to do (Aku, 1979)

In this song, a romantic/sexual partner is simply referred to as *onna* 'woman,' and is neither named nor directly addressed. This impersonal linguistic choice communicates a sense of distance and disrespect and adds to the blatant

misogyny conveyed by the content (i.e., slapping a woman and disapproving of a woman who talks much).

Aku also used *otoko* ‘man’ in the song *Samurai* ‘Warrior,’ in which a man addresses the woman he is leaving, as shown in (6).

- (6) *arigatō jenī*
omae wa ī onna datta
hanpa na wain yori yowasete kureta yo
dakedo jenī abayo jenī
ore wa ikanakucha ikenai n da yo
 [...]
 otoko wa dare demo fukō na samurai
hanazono de nemurenu koto mo aru n da yo

Thank you Jenny
 You were a good woman
 You got me drunker than mediocre wine
 But, Jenny, good-bye, Jenny
 I have to go
 [...]
 Every **man** is an unhappy warrior
 He cannot always sleep in a flower garden (Aku, 1978)

The definitional statement about men towards the end of the verse purports to explain why the speaker could not stay with “Jenny” and be happy: *otoko wa dare demo fukō na samurai* ‘every man is an unhappy warrior.’ Another definitional statement about men appears in the second verse of the song: *otoko wa itsudemo kanashī samurai* ‘a man is always a sorrowful warrior.’ This reluctance to accept domestic happiness is also echoed in *Sakaba de DABADA* ‘DABADA at the bar.’ The song goes, “If you were an evil woman, I would stay, but if I found out you were a kind woman, I would say good-bye” (Aku, 1980).

Feminist writer Kyoko Shimazaki (2023: 230) referred to this period as “when Kenji Sawada performed Yu Aku’s masculinity philosophy, which represents men’s *kiza* ‘conceit, pretentiousness’ and *yasegaman* ‘pretended endurance (for the sake of pride).’” Another author also described Aku’s lyrics as expressing *yasegaman ni ikiru otoko no bigaku* ‘the aesthetics of men who live with pretended endurance (for the sake of pride)’ (Akiyama, 2019: 145). In a 1980 interview with *Playboy* magazine, Aku himself affirmed this characterisation. In (7), “PB” refers to the *Playboy* interviewer.

- (7) PB: Indeed, in your lyrics [...] there is a genre of male aesthetics or a passionate message to men [...].
- Aku: [...] Mr. Sawada happens to be perceived in a very fashionable way through TV, but he is a man with a very solid essence.
- PB: He is quite a samurai.
- Aku: [...] A sample of the kind of man you want to be and the kind of life you want to lead [...] I wanted to put such an example out there. I think my lyrics show that example. (quoted in Akiyama, 2019: 43–45)

To summarise, in the songs he wrote for Sawada, Aku created male characters who are misogynistic and prideful and who reject ordinary domestic happiness, and he intended this portrayal to serve as a role model for men to aspire to. The linguistic choice of the rough forms in many of the hit songs from this era, including the first- and second-person pronouns *ore* and *omae* and the direct imperative verb forms, as well as the sexist content and expressions, contributed to this image of a dominant, powerful, sexist, and misogynistic man.

Whether or not men actually aspired to follow this model, Sawada's songs with Aku's lyrics, as well as other songs that used the rough forms, were extremely popular. Sawada's enormous popularity, which began in the 1970s and continued into the early 1980s, suggests the audience's approval, or at least tolerance, of these gender stereotypes, reflecting the patriarchal nature of Japanese society at the time. Ito (2019: 51) characterised the gender structure of the 1970s and 1980s in Japan as a system in which "men worked long hours and women did housework, childcare, and part-time work after raising children." If women worked outside the home, they were often expected to serve their male colleagues tea (Ueno, 2022: 63) and pressured to resign after getting married (58). Suzuki (2017) observed that this gender role division of labour, in which women did unpaid care work (or work for low pay) and men engaged in paid full-time employment, was deeply involved in the reproduction of inequality between men and women in the society. She also noted that gender role stereotypes emphasising female-male differences greatly contributed to the maintenance of this gender role division of labour (76).

Female-male differences were certainly emphasised in Sawada's lyrics, especially those written by Aku. In songs such as *Samurai* 'Warrior,' *Nikumiki-renai rokundenashi* 'Loathsome bastard,' and *Kasaburanka dandī* 'Casablanca dandy,' women are passive, forgiving, and domestic. On the other hand, men are dominant, prideful, misogynistic, and dismissive of domestic happiness.

Aku, in the *Playboy* interview in (7), described Sawada as “a man with a very solid essence,” while the interviewer called him “quite a samurai,” both of them portraying him as if he were a stereotypically manly man. They implied that Sawada embodied Aku’s ideal man, a role model for other men in Japan. However, there was another side to Sawada, to which I now turn.

3.2 *Gender Non-conformity*

Although the lyricists who wrote for Sawada in the 1970s and 1980s (most notably Yu Aku) often emphasised his masculinity, Sawada himself engaged in various gender non-conforming behaviours which undermined the normative masculine imagery of his songs, including the nickname he chose for himself, the acting roles he accepted, and the visual style he displayed in his performances.

As Nakamura (2021: 55) observed, a name “has the power to create the person it refers to and sometimes gives an identity to them.” While he was still a member of The Tigers, Sawada had to choose a nickname. He decided on *Jurī*, from the name of the English actress Julie Andrews (Sawada, 1986: 5), and *Jurī* is how his fans and the general public refer to him to this day. The name contributes to what is often described as Sawada’s aura of androgyny (e.g., Miller, 2006: 126).

As an actor, Sawada took some roles that involved sexually heightened scenes with another man. For example, his character kisses a man in the 1981 film, *Makai tenshō* ‘Rebirth of the World of Spirits.’ In the 1975 television drama, *Akuma no yō na aitsu* ‘He Is Like a Devil,’ Sawada played a character whose relationship with another man was strongly suggestive of a romance. This drama inspired the novelist Kaoru Kurimoto (a.k.a. Azusa Nakajima) to write a trilogy which is considered to be the first work of “boys love” (BL) literature in Japan (Shimazaki, 2023: 9–10). Minori Ishida, who studies BL fiction, said:

- (8) In BL, a woman sees and a man is seen. Since the subject and object are reversed from their traditional positions, many Japanese men feel it is an insult to be seen. So, for men, *fujoshi* [women who consume media depicting male-to-male relationships] are an intolerable presence that cuts to the root of their pride. But Julie had no hesitation in offering himself to his fans and creators. (cited in Shimazaki, 2023: 28)

Miller (2006: 126) also argued that Sawada’s celebrity persona was “an early expression of a male interest in being the object of female and/or male observation and desire.” Neither homoerotic behaviour nor being the object (as

opposed to the agent) of desire easily fits the image of a stereotypical (heterosexual) man, certainly not the role model that Aku had in mind.

In addition, in his music performances, Sawada projected gender non-conformity through semiotic signs such as makeup, jewellery, and costumes. For example, in one concert, Sawada

emerged in a bright pink, gorgeously embroidered Chinese dress. He wore silver eye shadow, purple nail polish, heavy earrings, rings, and even a pearl necklace under his jacket and silver net shirt. (Shimazaki, 2023: 104)

Even on a conservative public broadcasting channel, NHK, Sawada appeared

waving a red ostrich stole, wearing a white jacket with a fur waistband and flared hem, flared pants of the same colour, and London boots. He wore a black glove on his left hand, a black brooch on his fur collar, and four strands of pearls swinging on his bare chest. (Shimazaki, 2023: 102)

The images that Sawada's artistic director designed and Sawada embodied in his performances did not conform to the gender norms expected of (heterosexual) men. Eiko Ishioka, who designed Sawada's nude photography book, remarked, "All by himself, Kenji Sawada challenged the Japanese man's rigid belief of how a man should be" (Shimazaki, 2023: 27).

These contradictory presentations made him a paradoxical figure in Japan. Many people with conservative views on gender roles nonetheless appeared to accept Sawada's gender non-conforming behaviours. This paradox, in fact, reflects a long history of "blurred sexualities and gender-bending practices" in Japan (Robertson, 2017). Salenius (2023: 10) wrote:

Gender in Japan has traditionally been constructed through emphasizing distinct gender roles for men and women, [...] but there also is, and has been, a strong presence of gender ambiguous figures. In addition, cross-dressing has been a prominent feature in Noh Theater since the fourteenth century and in Kabuki performances of the sixteenth century.

Based on this history and her observations of more recent society, Mitsuhashi (2008: 22) concluded that the Japanese have a strong affinity for performing arts that transcend gender boundaries. Seen in this light, Sawada's gender non-conformity may merely reflect Japan's paradoxical acceptance of gender ambiguities; however, Sawada's statements from this era suggest otherwise, as discussed in the following section.

3.3 *Intentionally Paradoxical Style*

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sawada made public comments suggesting that his gender non-conformity in performance was an intentional choice to undermine images of dominant masculinity. For example, a 1978 interview with a conservative critic includes the following exchange:

- (9) Interviewer: You sing on stage wearing earrings, a necklace, a ring, and gaudy clothes. [...] Why would a man dress up as a woman and sing a song?

[...]

Sawada: It's not so much that the clothes I wear are feminine, but rather that they are neither male nor female. They represent Kenji Sawada singing, and gender does not matter. So, of course, I want women to like me, but on the other hand, I also want men to like me, and if there are people who are neither men nor women, I want them to like me, too. I feel that it is better to be in a place that is neither (female nor male). (PARAMYLOVE TOPAZ, 2022)

Looking back on this era, he described his strategies more explicitly, as in (10).

- (10) To be honest, I didn't really like Mr. Aku's lyrics. I myself preferred to be a sissy. [...] I tried to create different images from that of the lyrics by applying makeup and thinking up costumes. (quoted in Aku, 1992: 145)

Both statements indicate that Sawada's paradoxical style was not accidental, but the result of a conscious decision to use his appearance to contradict the stereotypically sexist gender ideologies represented in the songs he was performing.

Later in his career, Sawada brings more of his own ideologies into his lyrics, thus displaying fuller agency, as detailed in Section 4.

4 Hope: Gender and Political Ideologies of Kenji Sawada in Contemporary Japan

4.1 *On Gender*

More than forty years have passed since Sawada's popularity was at its peak. I argued in Section 3 that the lyrics of Sawada's songs reflected how male-dominant Japan was in the 1970s and early 1980s. Has Japan changed? To some extent, yes. Many sexist customs and laws have disappeared. Aku's

explicitly misogynistic lyrics would probably not sell today. However, in other ways Japan remains deeply patriarchal. Suzuki (2017: 62) observed that despite “the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the establishment of laws prohibiting gender discrimination, [...] gender inequality still persists in Japanese society.” In 2024, *The Japan Times* reported that the World Economic Forum ranked Japan 118th out of 146 countries on gender equality (Tang, 2024). Recently, Taro Aso, vice president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, spectacularly demonstrated how patriarchal the country still is when he called Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa an *obasan* ‘middle-aged woman,’ saying: *oretachi kara mitetemo, kono obasan yarunē to omotta* ‘even from our point of view, we thought this *obasan* was good’ and *sonna ni utsukushi kata to wa iwan keredomo* ‘I wouldn’t say she is that beautiful’ (*Asahi Newspaper*, 28 January 2024, cited by Nikaido and Matsui, 2024). While his sexist remarks were widely criticised, Aso suffered no consequences; he remains powerful in the ruling party.

Against this bleak background, Kenji Sawada and the fact that he is “trending” again provide a ray of hope. Although Aso (b. 1940) and Sawada (b. 1948) belong to roughly the same generation, they are light-years apart in their perspectives on gender. Notice that in the sexist comment Aso made, he used the rough first-person pronoun *oretachi* (‘us, we’; the plural form of *ore*) to refer to himself and his fellow male politicians. His use of this pronoun in this context, which highlights male in-group solidarity and alienates the female foreign minister, reflects his gender ideology. In this section, I will examine Sawada’s interview discourses, the content of his lyrics from the mid-1990s on, and his linguistic choices in these lyrics to argue that he expresses a much different gender ideology.

After he vanished from television, Sawada continued to release albums and singles. During the 1970s and early 1980s, a large company managed the production and branding of his performances. However, from 1985, when he left that production company and created his own, Sawada gradually took charge of his own career. In his 1986 autobiography, he said he had been feeling a sense of crisis, wanted to control his work, and planned to show more of his “true self” (Sawada, 1986: 225–227). In 1995 he started self-producing all of his music (Shimazaki, 2023: 345). An *Asahi Newspaper* journalist reported:

- (11) I interviewed Mr. Sawada when he was in his 50s. He said, “I think ‘male aesthetics’ are useless.” He said “women’s words are more relevant to me” than “the image of a man as portrayed by men of our generation.” For his self-produced albums, he asked women to write the lyrics, except for the ones he wrote himself. He also said, “I want

to write songs about what I think in my daily life and (my discomfort with) gender.” (Hayashi, 2021)

In another interview (Morobushi, 1998: 36), Sawada said that he preferred female lyricists because they are more articulate and bolder. *Otoko no bigaku* ‘male aesthetics,’ mentioned in (11), is a phrase often associated with Yu Aku’s lyrics (as also seen in the *Playboy* interview cited in (7)). As discussed earlier, Aku portrayed misogynistic and prideful men who dismiss ordinary happiness, and Aku intended this portrayal to serve as a role model for men. Sawada’s scorn for “male aesthetics” and “men of [his] generation” in (11) and his praise of female lyricists suggest that he intended to challenge what Aku’s lyrics represented and to express a different gender ideology in his self-produced albums.

After Sawada started to self-produce his music in 1995 and especially in the 2000s, he worked frequently with two female lyricists: Grace and Wakako Kaku. Kaku has said that Sawada shared surprisingly private matters with her (Shimazaki, 2023: 350), presumably so that she could use them in her lyrics. The lyrics of Grace, Kaku, and Sawada himself clearly reject the image of a man promoted by Aku. For instance, Grace’s lyrics in the 2001 song, *Taisetsu na futsū* ‘Precious ordinary,’ read like a direct rebuttal to the lyrics of *Samurai* (as shown in (6)).

- (12) *ai wa kokyū to onaji da yo*
taisetsu na futsū
kurushimu hitsuyō nante zenzen iranai
taisetsu na futsū

Love is like breathing
 The precious ordinary
 No need to suffer at all
 The precious ordinary (Grace, 2001)

The song embraces ordinary life and shuns suffering. Other songs portray the pursuit of happiness. In fact, the word *shiawase* ‘happiness’ appears in multiple songs. (13) is from the 1995 *Gin no hone* ‘Silver bones,’ written by Kaku; (14) is from the 2002 *Tsuzuku shiawase* ‘Lasting happiness,’ written by Sawada; and (15) is from the 2007 *Ikietara shiawase* ‘Happy if we are alive,’ also by Sawada.

- (13) *setsunasugiru koishita ato de*
honto no kimi ni aeta
boku wa shiawase osorenai

After a too-sad love
 I met the real you (kimi)¹⁰
 I (boku) am not afraid of **happiness** (Kaku, 1995)

- (14) *tsuzuku shiawase heiwa na toki o*
yurushiaeru nara saikō da ne
tsuzuku shiawase tashikametai na
kimi o omou tamashī no fukasa

Lasting **happiness**, a time of peace
 It would be great if we could forgive each other
 Lasting **happiness**, I want to make sure
 The depth of my soul when I think of you (kimi) (Sawada, 2002)

- (15) *ikitetara shiawase*
itte ī
donna kimi mo dakishime donna kimi mo uketome ok
boku ga hitsuyō na no wa kimi to aruku michinori oh yeah

Happy if we are alive
 I can say it
 I can embrace any you (kimi), I can accept any you (kimi), okay
 All I (boku) need is to walk the path with you (kimi), oh yeah
 (Sawada, 2007)

Other songs that Sawada has self-produced portray a couple who both work outside the home (*Ai wa itai* ‘Love hurts’; Sawada, 1997), a man who is a home-maker (*Kimi no kirei no tameni* ‘For your beauty’; Kaku, 2000) and a man who cheers on a partner who is going through menopause (MENOPAUSE, Sawada, 2005). Unlike the hero of Yu Aku’s creations, who is dominant, misogynistic, prideful, and dismissive of domestic life, the man that Sawada (and the female lyricists with whom he has worked closely) depicts often embraces ordinary life and happiness, which seems to reflect Sawada’s egalitarian gender ideology.

Another theme which recurs in Sawada’s self-produced songs is men who cry. (16) is from the 2006 *Sakura mau* ‘Cherry blossoms dance,’ and (17) is taken from the 2008 *Umi ni mukete* ‘Towards the sea,’ both written by Sawada.

10 In the songs shown in (13)–(17), the lyricists used *boku* as the first-person pronoun and *kimi* as the second-person pronoun, as noted in the translation. I will discuss their significance later in this section.

- (16) *sakura mau sakamichi o kimi to nobotteiru*
sora wa akumademo ao sukoshi kanashi
sakura no hana ga suki da someiyoshino ga ī
chiridoki ga migoto da ne boku ga naita

I'm going up the hill with you (kimi), with the cherry blossoms dancing

The sky is blue and I feel a little sad

I like cherry blossoms, especially *someiyoshino*

They're so beautiful when they fall, I (boku) **cried** (Sawada, 2006)

- (17) *boku no kanashimi ga aozora ni mayou hi wa*
kimi to konoyo de sayonara no hi
memeshikute mo ī n da musebi naite naku yo
kimi ga konwaku warau kurai

The day my (boku) sorrow is lost in the blue sky

The day I say goodbye to you (kimi) in this world

It's okay to be a sissy, I'll **weep and weep**

So hard you (kimi) will laugh in embarrassment (Sawada, 2008)

In both songs, a man imagines the death of his partner and cries. As Ito (1993: 7), among others, has pointed out, the hegemonic manly man would not show any emotion, let alone cry. The theme of a man crying at the thought of parting with a loved one clearly contests the image of an unemotional and dominant man.

Such contestation of the old gender ideology is also evident in the choices of personal pronouns. Gone is the pair of rough forms, *ore-omae*, which was ubiquitous in Sawada's songs in the 1970s and 1980s. As discussed in Section 3.1, the use of *omae* alone or in tandem with *ore* conveys a man's feeling of intimacy with as well as deprecation of and dominance over a woman (SturtzSreetharan, 2009: 268). Instead of the *ore-omae* pair, Grace, Kaku, and Sawada heavily use the *boku-kimi* pair, as seen in examples (13)–(17). As Nakamura (2007: 74) observed, the first-person pronoun *boku* and the second-person pronoun *kimi* represent the newer, gentler style of masculinity. In a 2003 interview, Sawada said that *kimi* in all of his contemporary songs refers to his wife, Yuko Tanaka (Shimazaki, 2023: 357). Sawada has publicly expressed his respect for Tanaka, who is an accomplished actor (HS, 2019).

In addition, Sawada has explicitly challenged the patriarchal society in interviews, as, for example, in (18).

- (18) They say men and women are equal, but [I interpret that to mean] men should also raise children and, in the extreme, give birth to children [laughing]. It is of course better to have a relationship with a woman that is not hierarchical but is a partnership. (Morobushi, 1998: 37)

Sawada was obviously aware that his gender ideology was in direct opposition to the patriarchal norms in Japan, and the lyrics of the songs he has self-produced, which include the use of *kimi* to address a romantic partner in an equal or respectful relationship, reflect this ideology.

4.2 *On Politics*

Section 4.1 focused on lyrics and interview discourses centring on issues of gender. In Sawada's self-produced songs, the softer *boku* and *kimi* are used instead of the rough personal pronouns, *ore* and *omae*. However, this does not mean that these songs do not contain any rough forms. Instead of expressing powerful or rugged masculinity, however, in the self-produced songs, Sawada seems to have employed the rough forms to make strong assertions of his political views.

An article in *The Japan Times* called show business in Japan “an industry whose members usually avoid anything smacking of politics so as not to jeopardize employment opportunities” (Brasor, 2020). Sawada is one of the few celebrities who speak up, and he has expressed his political views in both interviews and songs. In a 2012 interview with the *Asahi Newspaper* (cited in Akiyama, 2019: 186), Sawada said that around the time he turned 60, he decided to express his political views. Sawada has written the lyrics of every song he has released since 2010, many of which address politics. In a 2012 interview with the *Mainichi Newspaper*, Sawada said:

- (19) After all, I can't sing anymore if it's not in my own words. I sing old songs and hits. But new songs have to be sung in my own way, with my own feelings, or they lose their purity. (cited in Shimazaki, 2023: 365)

The political issues addressed in Sawada's songs range from the need to protect the Constitution and criticism of the governing Liberal Democratic Party to protests against nuclear power. In fact, since the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in 2011, most of the new songs Sawada has written convey compassion towards the disaster victims and opposition to nuclear power.

In the songs in which Sawada aggressively criticises politicians, he uses the rough forms, as (20) and (21) illustrate.

- (20) *kuni wa minna o mamori wa shinai*
nani mo seiji wa mamore ya shinai
*haji o shinobi jibun de **mamore***

The state does not protect its citizens
 Politics cannot protect anything
 Swallow your pride and **protect** yourself (Sawada, 2018)

- (21) *uso de kawashi kasane katame makaritōsu*
negusare politician
hōrei ihan gisō inpei usurawarai
negusare politician
*sorya otamegokashi hikari **nanka mienē***

They lie, cheat, pile on the lies, and get away with it
 Root-rotting politician
 Violation of the law, forgery, cover-up, smirking
 Root-rotting politician
 That's a lie, I **can't see the goddam light** (Sawada, 2019)

In the first two lines in (20), Sawada urges Japanese citizens to protect themselves because the government will not protect them. These words are quite strong and biting, and the force of the third line, “Swallow your pride and protect yourself,” adds to their impact. The word *mamore* ‘protect’ is a direct imperative and thus among the rough forms. The aggressive tone comes across even more strongly in (21). The content of the repeated line *negusare politician* ‘root-rotting politician,’ as well as other phrases such as *makaritōsu* ‘get away with it,’ *inpei* ‘cover-up,’ and *otamegokashi* ‘lie,’ conveys Sawada’s anger towards politicians. The caustic tone peaks in the last line, *sorya otamegokashi hikari nanka mienē* ‘That’s a lie, I can’t see the goddam light.’ The topic marker *nanka* indicates the feeling of contempt, but more crucially, the predicate *mienē*, the contracted form of *mienai* ‘can’t see,’ which belongs to the rough forms, sounds extremely aggressive. In both (20) and (21), Sawada effectively uses the rough forms to increase the forcefulness of his messages.

As mentioned in Section 2, the rough forms index pragmatic meanings such as roughness, harshness, and forcefulness, which can be interpreted in

different contexts to index one or more related meanings including, among others, rugged masculinity, strong emotions, in-groupness, rebelliousness, and youthfulness. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Sawada's different lyricists (most notably Yu Aku) used the rough forms, they used them to express powerful masculinity. In (20) and (21), the songs written by Sawada, masculinity does not seem to play a central role. Although listeners might still interpret these uses of the rough forms to signal masculinity, I argue that Sawada used the rough forms primarily to communicate his strong emotions (e.g., anger) and perhaps rebelliousness, but not masculinity. I base this interpretation on the distaste for overt manliness that Sawada has expressed in the past, as when he said he "preferred to be a sissy" when discussing his displeasure with Aku's lyrics in (10), and when he wrote, "It's okay to be a sissy, I'll weep and weep," in the song *Umi ni mukete*, shown in (17).

4.3 *Hope for a More Progressive Japan*

Sawada's core fans are women in their 60s or 70s. These fans have followed him from his early years (Watanabe, 2023).¹¹ More recently, Sawada has been gaining new generations of fans. In 2018, he cancelled a concert at the last minute, which was widely reported and for which he was severely criticised. As his core fans stood by his choice and defended him,¹² the incident caught the attention of many (Tanaka, 2024: 98). It was at this time that some news sites reported on Sawada's political songs (Henshūbu, 2018). Ironically, as a result of the harsh criticism, Sawada gained new fans and wider attention to his political views. In addition, young people have been encountering him and his music for the first time on YouTube and other sites (Watanabe, 2023).

As mentioned, Japan's patriarchy is still quite powerful. The taboo against celebrities speaking out politically also attests to the dominance of those who are currently in power. Into this grim scene, Sawada's recent popularity brings a ray of hope. As new fans are experiencing Sawada's performances, they are also discovering his songs that address gender and political issues. At least some of the new fans embrace his political stances and gender ideologies. For example, the Osaka Lawyers Association published an interview which favourably featured Sawada's views (Osaka Bengoshi-kai, 2015). The news site *Litera*

11 Asuko Taira's 2007 novel *Anata ga paradaisu* 'You are paradise' portrays such fans, depicting them closely examining Sawada's lyrics and expressing their sense of how his songs support and encourage them, and their appreciation of his egalitarian messages.

12 Many have noted the strong bond between Sawada and his fans (Tanaka, 2024). See Miyazaki and Furukawa (this issue) for a discussion of fandom in Japan.

has also expressed respect for Sawada's political outspokenness (Henshūbu, 2018). On 14 May 2024, *Asahi Newspaper* published an opinion forum titled *Yappari Juri* 'After all, it's Julie,' in which Sawada was praised for the way he presents himself in terms of gender and political ideologies as well as his musical performances (Nakajima and Yamaguchi, 2024). The growing numbers of his fans and admirers might suggest the possibility of a more socially and politically progressive Japan.

5 Discussion

Goffman (1981) argued that the notion of "speaker" is too simplistic. He proposed that the role of a speaker actually encompasses three roles, which he labelled the "animator," "author," and "principal" (144). An *animator* refers to the individual who makes the physical sounds that comprise an utterance. An *author* is "someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded" (144). And a *principal* represents "someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say" (144). We can apply these notions to Kenji Sawada's songs from different eras in an attempt to understand how he positioned himself in relation to the lyrics.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the "animator" was Sawada as he sang those songs. However, the "authors" were the lyricists, such as Yu Aku. It is not clear who the "principal" would have been, since neither Sawada nor the lyricists necessarily believed in the sentiments expressed in the songs (although, as we saw in the *Playboy* interview shown in (7), Aku did express his own gender ideals in some of his lyrics). In the songs of this era, the lyrics contained numerous instances of rough forms, which the lyricists used to portray dominant, assertive, and misogynistic men. Some songs also included definitional statements about gender relations in which men are prideful and dismissive of domestic happiness while women are passive, forgiving, and expected to wait for their men at home. These portrayals depicted men and women as complete opposites, and reflected the gender ideologies of the conservative and patriarchal society that Japan was (and to some extent still is).

Sawada the animator clearly wanted to distance himself from these authors. His statements in various interviews indicate that his own views on gender relationships greatly differed from those expressed in the lyrics of that era. Sawada also exhibited various gender non-conforming behaviours: he adopted

the nickname Julie, conventionally a woman's name; he performed homoerotic roles in which he presented himself as an object of desire; he wore makeup, jewellery, and costumes that were considered feminine.

As Eckert (2016: 77) mentioned, a style is composed of many elements: "clothing, facial expression, posture, movement, speech, and so on." Okamoto (forthcoming) also describes styling as a process in which individuals employ a wide variety of multilevel and multimodal semiotic resources to construct the desired contexts in situated practice. Applying these notions to Sawada, we can say that he actively pursued his style by employing multilevel and multimodal semiotic resources and intentionally contradicted the image of domineering masculinity through gender non-conforming acts. His style communicated his agency in contradicting the prevailing patriarchy.

After Sawada started self-producing his music in 1995, his styling practices changed. He gradually stopped wearing makeup and "feminine" costumes. We can understand this change in terms of Goffman's (1981) notions of animator, author, and principal as well. Sawada is obviously the "animator." He is also the "author." He himself writes the lyrics. And he closely works with the female lyricists he has hired so that their lyrics are consistent with his ideas. In interviews, he has explained his progressive ideas, which echo the messages expressed in the lyrics. This means that Sawada is also the "principal." Since he is now the animator, author, and principal, he no longer draws on the same semiotic resources he employed when his agency was limited and he could not control the messages of the songs he sang. He no longer needs to contradict the message of his songs, and his style reflects this fact.

6 Concluding Remarks

The implications of the findings discussed in this article, as they relate to the topic of this special issue, sexism and homophobia in Japan, might be summarised as follows. Kenji Sawada embodies a paradox. He sang songs in the 1970s and 1980s whose lyrics often reflected patriarchal gender norms. At the same time, he deployed multilevel and multimodal semiotic resources, quite intentionally, in order to push back against and undermine the images of hegemonic masculinity, which assumes heteronormativity, expressed in those lyrics. Using Kenji Sawada as a case in point, this article has illustrated how individuals can deal with and negotiate the norms and patterns of a society (such as sexist and/or homophobic language, beliefs, or customs), decide what stances they wish to take in a particular context, and construct a particular style by deploying diverse multilevel and multimodal semiotic resources.

This article also points to the possibility of change and of growing diversity in gender views in Japan. Sawada's more recent songs, for which he serves as his own producer, embrace egalitarian gender ideologies and reject hegemonic masculinity. In his political songs, he employs the very linguistic resources that the songs of the 1970s and 1980s used to express male dominance and misogyny in order to index something quite different. In the process, Sawada is sending powerful messages to his audience: it is okay to challenge the conservative gender norms that are ubiquitous in Japan; it is okay to speak up on political issues even when you are not supposed to. In a society where the pressure to conform abounds (Kokami, 2019), Kenji Sawada's messages are quite powerful, and his current popularity represents a ray of hope.

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