

# Yōko Ogawa's Subversion of the "Normal Life" in *The Housekeeper and the Professor*

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Ella Cuskelly

**Abstract:** In *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2009), Yōko Ogawa explores domesticity and the everyday for an unconventional family. The everyday that Ogawa creates, however, is an intentional subversion of Japanese cultural expectations of a "normal life." These "normal life" ideals are supposed to be the only path to happiness; however, Ogawa's novel shows that there is more than one way to achieve fulfilment, despite the social pressure exerted through these ideals. In my analysis of Ogawa's novel, I engage with Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni's work on the Japanese "normal life." I argue that Ogawa breaks cultural expectations and subverts traditionally gendered associations of domestic duty. These subversions demonstrate that the culturally expected and patriarchally motivated "normal life" is not the only way to achieve fulfilment—manifested through the eclectic family in *The Housekeeper and the Professor*.

Yōko Ogawa's novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* (2009) is a profoundly simple story of the everyday. However, this everyday is markedly different from the cultural expectations of the post-World War II "Bright New Life" (akarui seikatsu). This akarui seikatsu—a life of happiness and fulfilment—is supposed to be achieved through adherence to ideals of the "normal life" (Goldstein-Gidoni 282). Ogawa's novel subverts the promise of happiness in the Japanese "normal life" while simultaneously celebrating the products of domesticity that life encourages. In this paper, I analyse Ogawa's work through the lens of the "normal life" as described by Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni. I argue that the novel ascribes intellectualism and value to domestic labour that challenges the traditional ideal of the happy housewife. Ulti-

mately, the novel breaks Japanese cultural expectations and reorients our attitudes toward domesticity and the everyday. This subversion separates the traditionally gendered associations of domestic duties by subverting the expected link between the performance of expected domestic labour and the attainment of happiness. Ogawa's depiction of an eclectic family shows that the "normal life" is not the only path to happiness and fulfilment, even when social and cultural pressures informed by patriarchal structures exert immense force against such unconventional paths.

The *akarui seikatsu* emerged as a post-war attempt to rebuild Japan from inside the individual home. It was particularly marketed toward women as guiding their life path toward becoming "happy housewives" who build, maintain, and find joy in their homes (Goldstein-Gidoni 283). Ideal families were middle class, the husband a salaryman and the wife a full-time housewife. Japanese media emphasised the happiness of a "normal life"—the management of the home and fulfilment of social roles produced, above all else, a happy family. Though this "normal life" involves a husband, wife, and children, as Goldstein-Gidoni argues, "Surely, responsibility for producing this normal happiness lies in the hands of no other than 'normal housewives'" (289). Thus, the marketing of a normal, happy life was targeted primarily at women.

Ogawa subverts the "normal life" ideal in her portrayal of a happy family that does not fit into the essential elements: a heteronormative nuclear family, a marriage that precedes parenthood, and a clear division of labour between the man and woman (Goldstein-Gidoni 283). The man is responsible for working and providing financially and the woman for all domestic and everyday tasks of the home. This arrangement produces two important consequences. Firstly, labour, designated as feminine, is compensated non-monetarily. The housewife is rewarded for her efforts with the happy life *akarui seikatsu* promises. Her happiness is ultimately the happiness of her home, and she performs her role enthusiastically. Secondly, the husband is removed from the performance of domesticity. Ogawa's novel subverts this "normal

life” by celebrating domesticity in a family that does not abide by these traditional roles. Rather than rejecting the power of feminine labour by emphasising its non-monetary value or suggesting it requires less skill, Ogawa levels it in value with societally recognised masculine labour.

### **Subversion via Unconventional Family**

Ogawa’s primary subversion of the “normal life” ideal is achieved through her unconventional presentation of family. Throughout the novel, the Housekeeper and her son, Root, start to form a family with the Professor, who employs her. The Housekeeper is positioned uniquely to traditionally feminine roles, including her own motherhood and her performance of domestic labour. The Professor begins to act as a father figure to Root, embracing and enjoying a kind of parental role that also goes against the detached breadwinning salaryman portrayed by “normal life” ideals. By removing the strict barriers of the nuclear family, Ogawa demonstrates the love and happiness that can be equally achieved outside the constraints of gendered social roles.

The Housekeeper subverts both the roles of wife and mother. She is a single mother and is connected non-romantically to Root’s father figure, the Professor. Notably, the Housekeeper expresses a sense of alienation from her own state of motherhood: “When I first saw him in the hospital nursery, I felt something closer to fear than to joy ... His tiny arms and legs ... flailed from time to time as if in protest at having been left here by mistake” (Ogawa 30). Ogawa weaves an estranged motherhood into the fabric of her relationship with Root. The use of “mistake” and “fear” here suggest that the Housekeeper does not conceptualise her self-identity with motherhood. Comparatively, in Japanese femininity, “motherhood is synonymous with femininity to the point that it ‘ellipses all other identities’” (Charlebois 6). It is expected that women follow a typical path from their career through to marriage, leaving their jobs to embody their new role as housewives. Any diversion from this norm—such as being unmarried, continuing work, or not having children—signals a failure to follow a life plan that promises

happiness. The Housekeeper's embodiment of such diversions establishes a firm subversion of the Japanese nuclear family. In the "normal life," embracing and identifying with motherhood signals belonging to a fulfilling and important role in society and the family. By portraying the Housekeeper as alienated from this kind of fulfilment, Ogawa challenges the expectation that motherhood is a goal or purpose of womanhood, and that the fulfilment of this purpose always produces happiness (Goldstein-Gidoni 287).

The Professor, too, subverts "normal life" ideals through his deep involvement in Root's life as a father figure. Where the man of the home is typically detached from childrearing and is engaged in the family primarily as a breadwinner, the Professor becomes very close to Root (Goldstein-Gidoni 290). The Housekeeper remarks that "for him ... children were the foundation of everything worthwhile in the adult world" (Ogawa 130). This is demonstrated throughout the novel: the Professor's most intense moments of distress occur when Root is in danger and the Professor takes on a parental instinct. When Root is injured by a knife, the Professor panics and cries with worry (68). He encourages Root to eat more (29), shields him from rogue baseballs (95), and defends him from his sister-in-law's interrogation (120). All of these instances convey a strong sense of duty and protection characteristic of an involved parent.

Moreover, the Professor is also involved with Root's intellectual development, a task that also typically falls on women in the "normal life." Mothers in Japan are typically responsible for their children's educational success (Charlebois 5). Conversely, in Ogawa's novel, Root is educated by his father figure. The Professor challenges him with difficult problems and encourages his interest in mathematics. The Housekeeper comments on his teaching ability, noting that "it occurred to me that all parents should be giving this kind of help to their children" (Ogawa 35). Thus, the Professor becomes a kind of co-parent, which is fundamentally distinct from the post-war nuclear family. This involvement of the "father" in child rearing—as well as the happiness both the Professor and Root experience as a result—serves as an important challenge to the "normal life" ideal.

The second mode of subversion Ogawa uses is the empowerment of inferiorised feminine labour. The Housekeeper's domestic labour is valued monetarily and is acknowledged by the Professor as intellectually skilled, but still produces happiness as the "normal life" suggests. Ogawa subverts this division and valuing of labour in two main ways. Firstly, Ogawa's unconventional family removes traditional economic dependencies. In the Japanese "normal life," the husband provides for the family, but in the novel, the Professor's sister-in-law economically provides for him and the Housekeeper. While the Housekeeper is still financially reliant on the Professor, this dependence is removed to the connection to the sister-in-law, rather than him directly.

Another key difference between the Housekeeper and the "happy housewife" is the nature of happiness. In ideal iterations of the housewife, she is smiling, enthusiastic, and proud to carry out her duties (Goldstein-Gidoni 290). This happiness is ultimately performative; the image of a woman happily doing her job feeds into her self-perception as being a happy woman. She enthusiastically participates in child-rearing, cooking, and cleaning, though perhaps not genuinely. Though Japanese women may realise that this image is ultimately fake, they participate in the fantasy as part of the cultural fabric that expects them to do so, and that promises them happiness through the performance of that image (Goldstein-Gidoni 294). The Housekeeper, conversely, performs her role well, but not as a means to achieve happiness. The happiness she eventually feels toward her work emerges from a sense of genuine pride:

I looked at the food I had just finished preparing and then at my hands. Sauteed pork garnished with lemon, a salad, and a soft, yellow omelet. I studied the 2 dishes, one by one. They were all perfectly ordinary, but they looked delicious—satisfying food at the end of a long day. I looked at my palms again, filled suddenly with an absurd sense of satisfaction, as though I had just solved Fermat's Last Theorem. (Ogawa 135)

This passage illustrates the external validation of her domestic labour. The Housekeeper sees her contribution to the happiness of their family. Moreover, there is a unique ascription of intellectualism in the comparison to solving a mathematical problem. This passage thus levels the oft-appreciated masculine labour—the Professor’s math—with the everyday feminine labour the Housekeeper performs. It is an intrinsically productive act no less rational, skilled, or methodical than mathematics. Thus, unlike the housewife who continually works “believing that one day [her husband and children] will understand the value of her existence” (Goldstein-Gidoni 290), the Housekeeper receives more immediate external affirmation of her value. The Professor empowers the domestic by ascribing it methodical and intellectual rigour. Her pride and happiness with her work are non-performative. Domesticity produces a happy family when it is valued, appreciated, and acknowledged. This genuine happiness stands in opposition to the happiness that the “normal life” promises, where a strong sense of duty toward one’s role as a homemaker itself necessitates a somewhat performative “happiness” in doing that role (Goldstein-Gidoni 289).

The final sense of subversion occurs in the Professor’s gradual involvement in domesticity. In *The Poetics of Space* (1994), Gaston Bachelard acknowledges that “in the intimate harmony of walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women” (68). The masculine is traditionally removed from the nurturing power of the home. Susan Fraiman notes that, in Bachelard’s writing, his appreciation for personally performing domestic tasks stems from performing them out of choice, rather than necessity (347). In the absence of his housekeeper, Bachelard notes the creative power of consciousness in the domestic task. As Fraiman describes, “wiping a table is no longer a routine act of maintenance but a singular act of creation, quite akin to God breathing life into Adam” (347). The Professor, unlike Bachelard, does not separate the labour from the person: he sees the work done by the Housekeep-

er as hers. It is not merely that the Professor appreciates domestic labour when he does it voluntarily, but that he sees it as a genuinely valuable and intelligent act that marks the power and capability of its performer, the Housekeeper. The traditionally feminine body responsible for the work is more than a body keeping things in order; she is a mind, a person, a solver of theorems. When the Professor says, “I like to watch you cook”, he importantly includes the “you” (Ogawa 134). The act of domesticity itself is not separated from its agent; he does not like to watch merely the cooking itself. Where Bachelard appreciates such labour only when he performs it himself, the Professor is able to see its power and value unified with the Housekeeper as a capable and valuable person, not just as a part of the maintenance of his home.

Further, the Professor actively participates in domestic labour, a role entirely reserved for women in the ideal image of a Japanese nuclear family. For instance, before Root’s birthday party, the Professor takes an active role in cleaning and preparations. He applies his mathematical mind to domestic tasks: when he irons a tablecloth, he performs the task with method, thoughtfulness, and precision, “like the good mathematician he was” (Ogawa 167). His involvement shows a reconceptualisation of the domestic, wherein the masculine both participates in and appreciates inferiorised feminine labour. The Professor finds genuine joy by taking part in areas he would not be expected to. Thus, the Professor also achieves unexpected fulfilment when his role challenges the expectations of masculinity enforced by the “normal life” ideal. Here, his own diversion from the masculine expectations of the “normal life” makes him genuinely happy, signalling again that the “normal life” is not the only way to achieve happiness for men as well as women.

Ogawa’s *The Housekeeper and the Professor* details the struggle between norms that promise fulfilment by adhering to the status quo, and powerfully illustrates a more genuine happiness achieved by going against those norms. Through its presentation of an unconventional family, the empowerment of domestic labour, and masculine partici-

pation in domesticity, it challenges the cultural and social norms of the Japanese nuclear family. The Housekeeper's genuine happiness, found through her unique relationship to motherhood and feminine labour, opposes the ultimately performative happiness promised by the ideals of the "normal life." By subverting these norms, Ogawa depicts domestic labour as skilled, intellectual, and separated from gender roles, showing that our chosen families and mutual appreciation are the true path to a "Bright New Life."

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