Let's Fall in Love! ♡ : The Parody of Shoujo Conventions in Kaguya-sama: Love is War and Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun

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Abstract

In Japan, parody as a genre has been gaining prominence in the mass media since the 1970s as a form of acceptable social commentary. Parody manga, in particular, usually contain satirical humour based on subverting recognisable tropes and concepts—notably, often of gender stereotypes. Through our analysis of *Kaguya-sama: Love is War (Kaguya-sama)* and *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun (GSNK)*, we seek to explore how parody can be used to challenge gender norms typically seen in shoujo manga, and the potential it has to serve as meaningful commentary.

Kaguya-sama follows the top two students at a prestigious academy as they try to extract a confession from the other in a battle of wits, while *GSNK* is premised on a highschooler's crush on her stoic classmate, who turns out to be the author of her favourite shoujo manga. Both series are premised on recognisably shoujo scenarios and reference key shoujo concerns such as emotions and interpersonal relationships; but as parodies of the genre, also challenge and even deconstruct the gender roles ingrained in it. This makes what may seem like frivolous entertainment a source from which we can draw insight into gender roles in Japanese society.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Context of Parody in Japan

While the exact definition of "parody" is debated, Korkut (2009) defines a work of parody as "an intentional imitation—of a text, style, genre, or discourse—which includes an element of humor and which has an aim of interpreting its target in one way or another". Modern audiences enjoy such imitations for how they are "familiar yet unfamiliar, well-known yet differently re-presented" (Chan, 2016).

In Japan, parody as a genre has been gaining prominence in the mass media since the 1970s as a form of acceptable social commentary (Tomoko, 1994). Parody manga usually contains satirical humour based on the subversion of meanings in frequently iconic cultural items—of note, often ones of strongly identified gender types. Works by young *mangaka*s (manga creators) express a range of the problematic feelings the Japanese youth harbor toward established gender stereotypes. Macho, sexist behavior—often depicted in boys' and adult manga magazines—are ridiculed and rejected in parody manga written by teenage girls (Kinsella, 1998).

As a medium closely related to—and often based on—manga, such parodies are also prevalent in anime. *One-Punch Man*, which parodies the superhero genre, and *Ouran High School Host Club*, which subverts shoujo tropes, are examples of anime that have received critical acclaim and mass attention.

Context of the Shoujo Genre

The shoujo genre refers to works, mostly manga and anime, geared towards a young female audience. The name romanizes the Japanese word 少女 (*shoujo*), literally meaning "young woman". While the very definition of a shoujo is something that varies from scholar to scholar (Brown, 2008), the term *shoujo manga* refers only to those aimed explicitly at girls below 18, though they are also read widely by older women (Thorn, 2001).

Although shoujo refers to a demographic rather than an actual genre, shoujo works share many features—stories may involve family, school, fantasy, and/or comedy among other elements, with love as a common central theme, exploring human psychology through the emotional journey of a (usually) female protagonist (Takeuchi, 2010). Shoujo works are first and foremost about interpersonal relationships, developed and sustained (or ruined) primarily through conversations, which brings more attention to the subtleties in dialogue and its gendered implications (Thorn, 2001). Most storylines are observed to ultimately revolve around romance:

at a certain point, female protagonists, usually unemployed teenage students unconcerned with the world around them, enter into relationships. This repeated pattern, directed towards a wide audience, perhaps sends a message that conformity—being in a heterosexual romantic relationship—is good, thus propagating a message that entering into a romantic relationship is a necessary coming-of-age experience (Brown, 2008).

As society often takes cues on appropriate social behavior from examples found in popular television and cinema, audiences inevitably emulate the gendered performances of characters (Roskelley, 2016; Soer, 2020). Thus, as popular texts marked out for a gendered demographic, gender stereotypes may be strengthened in shoujo works through simplistic narratives aimed at younger audiences, and readership continuing on into adulthood may have an internalising, recycling effect on women (Choo, 2008).

Therefore, shoujo manga can be seen to portray and propagate conventional conceptions of gender roles, especially in the context of romantic relationships.

Our Focus

Due to the highly gendered nature of shoujo tropes, the aforementioned genre of parody is thus an interesting tool to dissect and understand gender roles through a humorous perspective. Parody, through the way it denaturalizes culturally embedded gendered practices, is able to effectively expose gender as performative, with its potential to 'undo' restrictive and oppressive gender expectations (Pullen & Rhodes, 2012).

In this paper, we seek to analyse the portrayals of gender in two anime parodies of shoujo mediums, namely, *Kaguya-sama Love is War* (abbreviated to *Kaguya-sama*) and *Monthly Girls' Nozaki-kun* (*Gekkan Shoujo Nozaki-kun*, abbreviated to *GSNK*). *Kaguya-sama* depicts the romance between Kaguya and Miyuki, two members of the student council, as a battle between the two where each party wants the other to confess, while *GSNK* follows Sakura's increasing closeness to her crush, Nozaki, who is a shoujo mangaka.

Both anime parody shoujo tropes to different effects: *Kaguya-sama* acknowledges the performativity of gender roles but shows the belief that in society, conformity is necessary to be desirable; *GSNK* downplays the importance of gender norms by normalising and even celebrating nonconformance.

Artificiality of Gender Roles

In both *GSNK* and *Kaguya-sama*, parody is used to highlight the illusory nature of gender roles. However, the two anime draw different conclusions from this: in the former, gender roles are challenged as they are portrayed as being divorced from reality, while in the latter, gender roles are an entrenched norm, but the artificial performance of such gender roles reveals their illusory nature.

In *GSNK,* the illusory nature of gender roles is highlighted through the disjunct between the cliches of shoujo manga - which uphold traditional gender roles - and the inability to replicate such cliches in reality. Hence, gender roles in *GSNK* by extension are at odds with the real world.

We are made privy to the cliches of shoujo manga through the perspective of our protagonist, Sakura. Sakura's name is, in itself, a common and stereotypical female name based on a traditionally feminine symbol. Pink cherry blossoms are associated with renewal and optimism in Japanese culture, reflecting Sakura's own romantic worldview, which is unsurprisingly heavily shaped by conventional gender roles. As a fan of shoujo manga, she expects reality to conform to the rigid gender norms imposed within fiction. While discussing the direction of the manga written by Nozaki, her love interest, she wonders if the events of the manga will lead to the manga's main couple sharing a bicycle, a scenario she terms a "traditional love event" or a common trope in shoujo. When explaining the trope, her use of images of female modesty in "She feels the heat from his back… 'Where should I hold on?' Her hands shaking with nervousness…" highlights the strong link between shoujo tropes and conventional femininity. By depicting the male as the pedalling party (Figure 1), Sakura further emphasises the link between shoujo tropes and conventional masculinity as such tropes associate men with dependability and physical strength.

Figure 1: Sakura's imagined version of the bicycle trope reinforces gender roles.

However, through parody, the realism of such shoujo tropes and by extension, the legitimacy of gender roles, is questioned. The cliche is at odds with reality, being deemed unrealistic by Nozaki as it is "illegal", revealing how the scenario is against societal regulations. Hence, when Nozaki and Sakura attempt to share a bicycle, they are forced to use a tandem bike with two separate seats, taking away the physical intimacy that adds romance to the trope, revealing that such a trope does not work in reality. Additionally, when Nozaki and Sakura attempt to mimic the original scenario's gender dynamic by making Nozaki (who sits in front) the only person pedalling, Sakura exclaims that "The guilt I feel from doing nothing is insane!" (Figure 2). This highlights the shame that arises in women due to reliance on men, critiquing the positive portrayal of women dependent on men in tropes. Lastly, when Sakura attempts to mimic the physical intimacy of the original scenario by holding on to Nozaki, this reveals itself to be more of a hassle as Sakura is unable to see where she's going. Therefore, we can see the infeasibility of shoujo cliches and by extension conventional gender roles in everyday life. This is only further highlighted when Nozaki attempts to translate his real life experiences into his manga by giving his male lead a tandem bike, which Sakura demeans as being "So lame!" and "[lacking] any appeal". Hence, the worlds of shoujo (and by extension the world of gender norms) and real life are fundamentally divorced from each other.

Figure 2: Sakura's embarrassment at relying on Nozaki's physical strength problematises the dependence on men that gender roles uphold.

In *Kaguya-sama*, shoujo tropes are once again parodied. According to Brown (2008), the norm in shoujo manga romances is for the male to initiate the relationships by revealing his feelings first. The female almost never confesses first, so she is at the "mercy" of the male until he declares his love. Through this, Brown highlights the helplessness of female protagonists in shoujo. However, in *Kaguya-sama*, both Kaguya and Miyuki, who are of different genders, are equally unwilling to confess, parodying the idea of male responsibility for confession and in so doing revealing the absence of gendered differences in the natural propensities of men and women.

Similarly, in *Kaguya-sama*, parody reveals that gender roles are performative and hence artificial. Both Kaguya and Miyuki (her love interest) are familiar with shoujo tropes. As a result, they consistently attempt to artificially instigate the occurrence of such scenarios in real life so as to seduce the other, parodying the same tropes they enact. For instance, during the rainy season, both Kaguya and Miyuki pretend that they have lost their umbrellas in the hopes of sharing an umbrella with the other individual. Such a trope is implicitly gendered as the male party typically holds the umbrella (Figure 3) while the female party depends on the male party for protection, mimicking conventional gender roles.

Figure 3: The man holds the umbrella.

However, when Kaguya and Miyuki attempt to mimic this trope through their contrived actions, the constructed, planned nature of this scenario highlights the equally constructed nature of gender roles. The cunning of Kaguya in particular is highlighted through the cumulative listing of the different tasks she performed to engineer such a scenario, "check[ing] the weather forecast, carefully analyz[ing] the weather map, pierc[ing[her chauffeur's car's tire with an awl [so she'd have an excuse to walk home], check[ing] for [Miyuki's] bicycle", therefore revealing the staggering amount of planning required in engineering such a situation. As the actions of

both parties are contrived and over-elaborate, the performativity of gender roles put forth in shoujo manga is revealed, inviting the audience to question them.

Overall, *GSNK* and *Kaguya-sama* subvert romance tropes in different ways. This is due to the differing aims of these anime — *GSNK* wishes to articulate an ideal vision of a world without the confines of gender roles, while *Kaguya-sama* wishes to expose the inner workings of gender roles in the society we live in today. Hence, while *GSNK* plays on the result of a trope, thereby highlighting that it does not correspond with reality, *Kaguya-sama* plays with the causes of tropes, examining the rationale that allows such tropes to work in reality. As a result, unlike in *GSNK*, where gender roles are rejected for their inaccuracy, gender roles in *Kaguya-sama* are retained and are instead performatively re-established due to the characters' inability to move past a conception of love defined by gender roles. This is revealed in both Kaguya and Miyuki's pursuit of love through cliches and tropes, showing their limited perspective on love.

Conformity and Deviance

The differing attitudes that *GSNK* and *Kaguya-sama* have towards gender roles are further reflected in their respective depiction of characters that conform to gender norms. In *GSNK*, the handful of characters who conform to gender roles to pursue their relationship goals find themselves paradoxically obstructed by such conformity. Conversely, deviation from gender roles is a strength—deviant characters have their places in society and are free to express themselves. In contrast, in *Kaguya-sama,* adherence to gender roles ostensibly allows one to increase one's attractiveness, making it a strength.

Conformity and Deviance in *GSNK*

GSNK's rejection of conventional gender norms is further revealed through the way the narrative teases Sakura for her adherence to the conventional femininity portrayed in shoujo manga protagonists — namely, her romanticisation of her crush and her shyness. When Nozaki asks her about her crush, we see Sakura's idealised view of Nozaki himself; she blushes and the sparkles that surround her imagined version of him (Figure 4) emphasise her romanticisation of Nozaki's charms. This starkly contrasts with Nozaki's indifferent treatment of her, as recounted by Sakura herself: "I asked him out, but he didn't notice… I think he only sees me as someone convenient". In a moment of great irony, Nozaki asks "What's so good about a guy like that?", questioning the value of unconditional pining that women in shoujo manga often have. This exchange critiques the passiveness expected of women—the reality is that the passive, pining image that women are conditioned to believe they should fit into is

futile. This is because passiveness results in a great degree of helplessness on the woman's part as the male interest holds the power of refusing or paying attention to her.
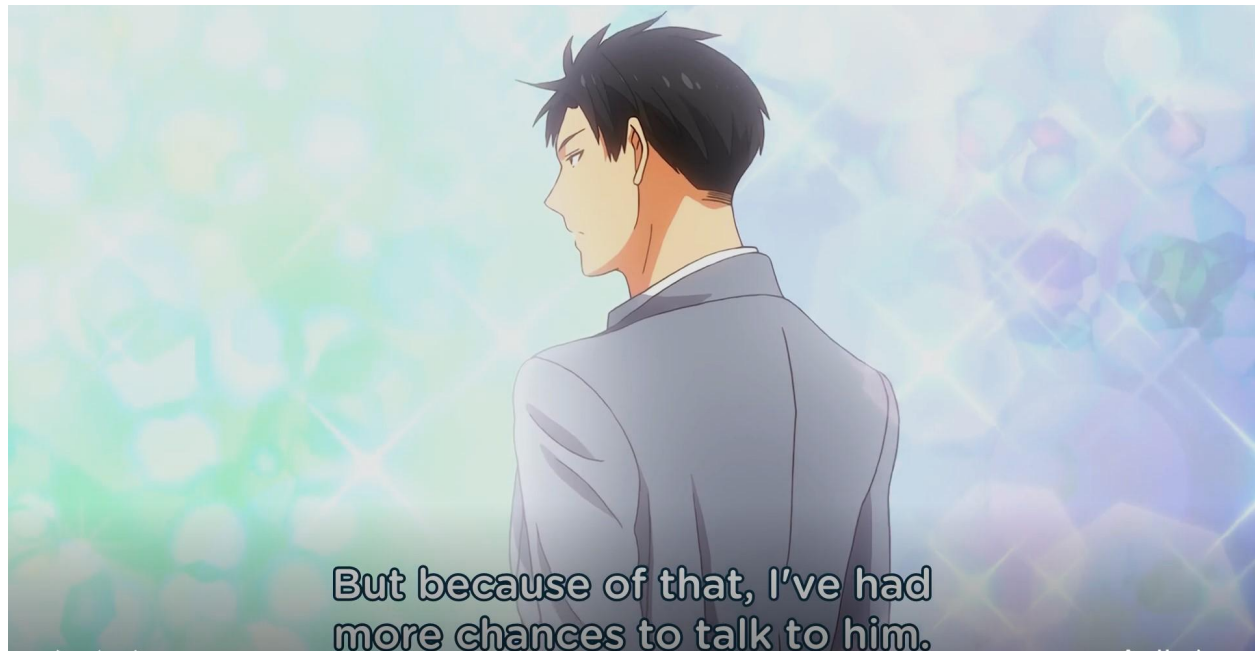

Figure 4: Sparkles surround Sakura's imagined version of Nozaki.

Sakura's inability to break away from her femininity is played for laughs in her attempted confession to Nozaki, which parodies other confessions. Her hesitation when she attempts to confess to Nozaki lasts an arduous thirty seconds, making it irritating instead of endearing. Furthermore, she only confesses that she is his "fan", which Nozaki mistakes as her expressing her admiration for his manga, creating a comedic anticlimax. The shyness and demureness that characterises typical ideas of femininity is an obstacle for Sakura and prevents her from achieving her goals. Hence, adhering to gender roles is portrayed to have a restrictive, detrimental effect on women.

In contrast, female characters in GSNK deviate from conventional gender norms to a larger extent. Kashima's masculinity manifests itself through her masculine appearance and charm as the "Prince of the School". Typically, tomboys in Japanese anime have a feminine streak that develops when they're in love, with some yearning to be recognised as women, emphasising their existence within the framework of gender roles (Ricard, 2005). Romantic love in manga/anime often serves to discipline characters of deviant gender presentations into conformity. However, *GSNK* inverts this by using love to encourage deviance, limiting the influence of gender roles through parody.

Instead of having a feminine streak of her own, Kashima believes that Hori has a feminine streak he wishes to express, Hence, she attempts to encourage him by leaving him various

pieces of feminine clothing to wear (Figure 5) and nominating him for the role of the princess in a school play.
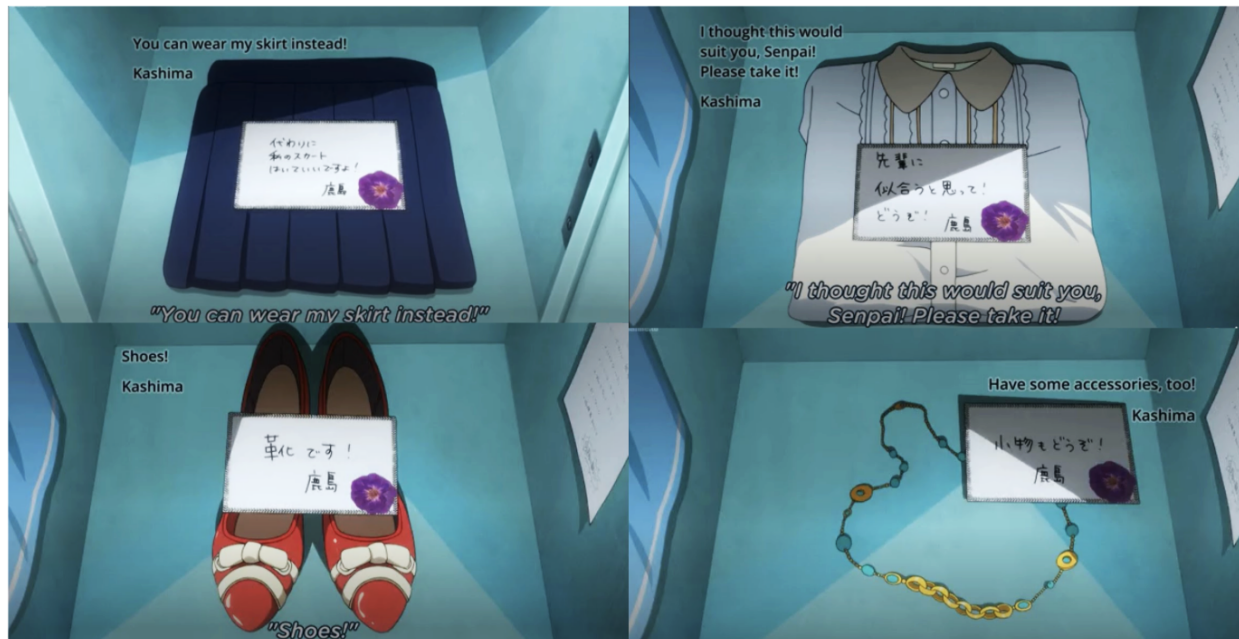

Figure 5: Kashima leaves female clothing behind for Hori.

Therefore, instead of Kashima conforming to Hori's gender presentation and being the more feminine person in their relationship, Hori is expected to become more feminine to suit Kashima's masculinity. This serves as a contrast to typical tomboy relationships in shoujo, where tomboys fall for feminine men and both characters learn to conform to the expected behaviour of their gender (Ricard, 2005). Hence, this further deconstructs gender norms by undermining the pervasiveness of gender roles' power to govern one's behaviour.

Additionally, Kashima's deviation from gender roles allows her to play a unique role in society, which embraces said differences. Kashima's masculine features give her a princely appearance, allowing her the adoration of many female classmates, as seen from the posse of girls that follow her around. She is also the star of the drama club due to her handsomeness. Hence, unlike in *Kaguya-sama*, where the continued prevalence of gender roles results in deviants being shunned, in *GSNK*, the disconnect between gender tropes and reality results in the rejection of gender tropes, allowing individuals who deviate from traditional expectations of their gender to thrive.

In contrast to Kashima, Mikoshiba demonstrates an exaggerated confidence when flirting with girls, which is in fact a facade for his own timidity (Figure 6). This goes against the typical ikemen stereotype of an effortlessly laid back and attractive male character, as he only appears to be so on the surface.

Figure 6: Mikoshiba unsuccessfully attempts to flirt with Sakura and assert his confidence.

Mikoshiba also goes against otaku stereotypes. Typically, individuals of the otaku subculture are viewed to be unmasculine, an undesirable trait. Despite this, Mikoshiba has an unconventional duality as both an otaku and a popular, attractive student in school. In addition, Mikoshiba displays personal insecurities and awkwardness around his peers. Mikoshiba's deviant character is thus created from a unique fusion of different stereotypical personas, from those of masculine men ('ikemen'), non-masculine otaku and women (through his feminine personality). Hence, as a character, Mikoshiba reveals the multitude of masculine and feminine traits that the ordinary person possesses, revealing the limitations of gender roles.

Mikoshiba is also the only character in *GSNK* who feels pressured to conform to gender roles. However, his failure to conform does not have any harsh consequences but is instead played out comedically, making him an endearing character we sympathise with, revealing that conformity is ultimately unnecessary. His standalone attempt to conform is contrasted against the majority of *GSNK* characters, who are comfortable with their gender deviations and do not

feel the need to put on displays of conformity. Outside of the *GSNK* universe, we see the contrast between *GSNK*'s celebration of deviance and the overhanging pressure to conform that plagues the characters in *Kaguya-sama*.

Conformity and Deviance in *Kaguya-sama*

Kaguya is often seen to mimic stereotypical feminine behaviour with the intent of appearing more attractive to Miyuki. This is congruent with the observation of romance narratives that present conforming to traditional femininity as advantageous to the heroines, as it is their femininity which is depicted as winning the man's heart (Nishiyama, 2016). As naivety is represented as a feminine ideal in the media (Ford, Voli, Honeycutt, & Casey, 1998) , Kaguya's faux naivety allows her to gain power within said gender role and become more conventionally desirable. When Chika presents Miyuki and Kaguya with two free movie tickets, Miyuki accepts one and tells Kaguya that she can come with him if she wants. As it is said that watching this particular movie with another person will cause the two of them to fall in love, Kaguya pretends that she believes in this feeble myth despite being extremely intelligent, so as to manipulate Miyuki into asking her out. She feigns ignorance, saying "unfortunately, I cannot help but believe in such things" in order to emulate desirable traits of innocence and helplessness. Her tear-filled eyes and the faint blush on her cheeks adds to the air of perceived innocence, as emphasised by the pink haze behind her (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Kaguya embodies femininity through farcical innocence.

This ostensibly simple pretense of innocence is depicted as weaponising conventional femininity through the portrayal of this skill as a secret technique "passed down the Shinomiya family for generations" which is capable of "melt[ing] even the gods' hearts." Miyuki, struck by her charm, even begins to falter, showing the effectiveness of hyperfemininity in gaining power

over the opposite gender. This ability to affect and allure differentiates Kaguya from the typical tsundere, as she is able to suppress her temperamental hostility tactically.

Still, Kaguya does not truly deviate completely from gender norms. Although her femininity in the above example is artificial, she is convinced by her servant to paint her nails to become more attractive (Figure 8), thus showing a genuine attempt to play into feminine expectations of physical beauty. Near the end of the season, she also unconsciously plays into the role of a 'damsel in distress' — she helplessly seeks out her friends, loses her way and has to be found by Miyuki, who also helps to fulfil her desire of seeing a fireworks display in-person. Such narrations of romance thus continue to construct women as passive, 'modern day damsels in distress', who need rescuing from contemporary problems. (Nishiyama, 2016).

Similarly, Miyuki also measures himself up against the standards of Japanese masculinity. Itō claims that men are characterised as the sole possessors of power in Japanese culture: they have power over women, and they dislike it when other men (superiors) have power over them. In the final examination season, Miyuki works through boxes of mechanical lead and piles of books, driven by the fear that Kaguya would contempt him if he came second to her. This reflects a deep-rooted belief that he must maintain his superiority over her by leveraging on his academic abilities in order to remain desirable. Another instance of him trying to defend his masculinity would be during physical education lessons, when he practices volleyball relentlessly for a week to compensate for his ineptitude at the sport and to avoid embarrassing himself as the achilles heel of the team. He constantly fears the despising looks of his male classmates, and feels an intense pressure to maintain his flawless image as student council president, someone "good at both sports and studies", the "well-rounded President Shirogane brand".

His endeavours to appear masculine are rewarded as Kaguya respects him for maintaining his top academic achievement, and even blushes deeply at his remarkable performance in the volleyball match, a visible sign of attraction. Indeed, Miyuki's display of masculinity has had a tangible effect on Kaguya, and he too becomes more desirable to her within his gender role. Therefore the anime ensures that characters try to adhere by gender norms at least outwardly, perhaps implying that a complete break from these norms would be unacceptable.

While conformity to gender roles is portrayed as a strength in that it generally makes characters more desirable, these roles are a superficial basis for a relationship. Chika, who serves as a foil to Kaguya, embodies the very feminine ideals that Kaguya lacks—cute, compassionate, innocent, loving—which should make her more attractive to Miyuki by comparison. Kaguya too views her as a competitor (although this is very much one-sided), and easily becomes jealous whenever Miyuki and Chika interact. However, the fact that Miyuki has never seen Chika in a romantic light suggests that his attraction to Kaguya lies beyond her display of femininity which

she has not yet come to recognise, hence her petty one-sided rivalry with Chika. Her perspective is defined by a set of gender norms which are perhaps very superficial in nature, and her attempts to conform to them may not have as lasting an impact on Miyuki as previously supposed.

Conclusion

In summary, the parodying of shoujo tropes in *GSNK* downplays the importance of gender norms through the normalisation and approval of nonconformance, while *Kaguya-sama* highlights gender performativity, yet still conveys the societal belief that desirability necessitates conformance.

To go one step further, we propose that the reason for why *GSNK* normalises gender non-conformance while *Kaguya-sama* still propagates gender conformance is due to the differences in authorial intentions and experiences, thus creating different implications.

GSNK's creator, Tsubaki Izumi, is a female shoujo mangaka whose previous works were all published in the shoujo magazine *Hana to Yume* ("Flowers and Dreams"). Her shoujo series directly preceding *GSNK*, *Oresama Teacher* (2007-2020) deliberately subverts stereotypical shoujo narrative tropes. In an interview, Tsubaki states that she "wanted to create a heroine opposite to what you usually see in shoujo manga"—a major concern is thus the female protagonist's conflict between an idealized feminine image she longs for and her in reality, where she eventually embraces her unconventional life and stops aiming towards a narrow feminine ideal (Donovan, 2018). Therefore, Tsubaki's desire to scrutinise and subvert the conventions and gendered implications of the genre can already be observed in her preceding works.

Additionally, *GSNK* is published in *GanGan Online*, a shounen magazine, in a publication titled "Shoujo Romance Web Girly", blurring the lines between demographics and again proving gendered constructions to be arbitrary. (Donovan, 2018). Tsubaki's background and experiences thus translate into our reading of her intentions—*GSNK* serves as a critique of gender roles in shoujo media (and by extension, Japanese society), conveying that diverging from gender norms should be accepted.

In contrast, *Kaguya-sama*'s creator, Akasaka Aka, is a male mangaka with no prior experience with the shoujo or romantic comedy genre. Kaguya-sama is published in Weekly Young Jump, a seinen magazine, and Akasaka himself acknowledges that as an otaku, his work may not resonate with the general female audience (Okamoto, 2020).

In creating Kaguya-sama, he has declared that he wants to write not just gags, but to occasionally, realistically portray the nature of various human relationships, such as rivalry, seniority and juniority, and friendship between men and women (Okamoto, 2020). His work therefore does not only intend to poke fun at certain tropes (and not necessarily tropes that focus on gender), but also to explore human relationship in a serious manner, deviating from parody in this aspect.

Akasaka's background and intentions may have thus influenced the implications about gender roles in Japanese society—although the parody in Kaguya-sama acknowledges the performativity of gender roles to a certain extent, the aim of the work is not to comment on shoujo gendered conventions in particular. Therefore, the work is still heavily grounded in the societal expectations of gender roles in romantic relationships, leading to the continued significance of gender roles in the series.

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