

# **Fumiko Kaneko (1903–1926)**

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Fumiko Kaneko was a female anarchist philosopher born in Japan in 1903. With her Korean partner Pak Yol, she founded the anarchist collective “Futei-sha” which published many articles arguing for anarchism and direct action (“Futei-sha” is named after “Futei-Senjin”, a government term for malcontent Koreans). Both Fumiko and Pak were pre-emptively detained during the major earthquake in 1923. During the detention, they testified that they had plotted to bomb the emperor’s son, which resulted in a death sentence for them. Though they were pardoned, Fumiko refused the pardon and killed herself in prison at the age of 23.

Her life is candidly written in her autobiography which has been translated into English (Kaneko 1991). In this book, we can see her powerful ego which was developed throughout her extremely oppressed life. Her philosophy is more explicitly expressed in her testimony at her trial. Also, I must note that there is a fantastic Korean film on Fumiko and Pak called *Anarchist from Colony* in which Korean actress Choi Hee-seo fabulously portrayed Fumiko, expressing Fumiko’s joyful aspect.

This article will examine her life story as well as her anarchist philosophy which I will refer to as *the anarchism of truthfulness*.

## 1. Life

### Unregistered Birth

When Fumiko was born, her parents did not register her as their child because they were officially not married, which Fumiko retrospectively thought of as being a decisive part in the formation of her identity. Being *unregistered*, she could not attend school properly. Her father left Fumiko and her mother to elope with Fumiko’s aunt, which forced them into a position so difficult that her mother even attempted to sell Fumiko to a brothel. She despaired over her miserable childhood:

*If only I could scream to the world at the top of my voice, I would hurl curses at all the mothers and fathers in the world! “Do you really love your children? Or, once the stage of instinctual mother-love is over, do you not merely pretend to love them while in fact you think only of your- self?”* (Kaneko 1991: 50).

### Conscious of Death in Korea

When Fumiko was 9 years old, her father’s mother came from Korea (Japan’s colony at that time) to adopt Fumiko as her daughter’s child. The grandmother said she could provide Fumiko with better education. Fumiko, with hope to finally go to school properly, went to Korea, but her hope was betrayed soon after. The aunt and grandmother did not like Fumiko’s manners and how she spoke as she lacked proper education. She was instead treated as a housemaid and was not allowed to play with her friends at all. Moreover, she was severely abused; whenever they did not like her behavior, they hit her and did not let her eat at all.

This everyday abuse made her decide to kill herself. However, when she put rocks in her cloth and about to sink herself into the abyss, she realized that she would never see the beauty of nature again. There were myriads of beautiful things left in the world that she had not yet seen. She then decided against committing suicide:

*If I died here, what would my grandmother and the others say about me, about why I died. They could say anything they liked, and I would never be able to deny it, to vindicate myself. I cannot die now, I thought. No, I have to seek vengeance; together with all the other people who have been made to suffer, I have to get back at those who have caused our suffering. No. I must not die.* (Kaneko 1991: 104).

Her life-long *vengeance* began here. She stopped pitying herself after this experience. She was no longer a child; she had a “little horned demon inside” (Kaneko 1991: 105). Her vengeance began with a thirst for knowledge. She had to learn more about the world where she was suppressed.

## **Exploited in Tokyo**

Eventually Fumiko was sent back to Japan. She lived in her mother’s family house and father’s house, but couldn’t get along with her family who did not allow her to further her studies. She was especially disgusted with her father’s attempt to make her marry her uncle who wanted her virginity. She decided to go to Tokyo with no farewell gift but recognition of the fact that her life cannot be hers living with them. She felt liberated to go to the metropolis:

*But thanks to a fate that did not bless me, now, at seventeen years of age, I found myself. I had reached the age when I could be independent, could create a life of my own, and Tokyo was to be the vast, untouched ground upon which I would construct this new life of mine. To Tokyo!* (Kaneko 1991: 169).

In Tokyo, she went to school living and working various jobs: as a newspaper seller, a stal-keeper, and a housemaid. Through this work experience, she found that she was actually exploited by the job promoters (such as socialists and christians). Aside from that, not only was she exploited as a proletariat but also as a woman; she had dated two men but both of them abandoned her when she mentioned having a child or marriage.

## **The Work of Her Own**

At the age of 18, she had two encounters which decisively affected her life. One was with Hatsuyo Niiyama in an English school. Hatsuyo was a sickly but very smart typist. When Hatsuyo was discussing death with other male students, arguing that we do not need to fear of death itself as we cannot experience it, Fumiko jumped into the discussion:

*“I don’t agree with you. I can state from my own experience that what people fear in death is the loneliness of having to leave this world forever.”* (Kaneko 1991: 233).

After this discussion, they became life-long comrades, though Hatsuoyo’s testimony of the bombing plot later led to the conviction of Fumiko and Pak. Hatsuyo gave Fumiko lots of books by “nihilistic” writers such as Max Stirner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Mikhail Artsybashev, which contributed to Fumiko’s development as an individualistic anarchist.

The other encounter is with Pak Yol. She read a socialist magazine in which she found a short poem by Pak, an individualistic anarchist. Every single phrase gripped her, and she felt as though her “very existence had been elevated to new heights” (Kaneko 1991: 234). About six months later,

she met him for the first time. He was a very quiet guy but had an air of dignity. Fumiko wanted to own the power working within him (Kaneko 1991: 239). Soon later, she straightforwardly asked him to date her:

*“Well, uhh ... I’ll get right to the point. Do you have a wife? Or ... well, if not exactly a wife, someone like, say, a lover? Because if you do, I want our relationship to be just one between comrades. Well ... do you? (...) I’ve found what I have been looking for in you. I want to work with you.”* (Kaneko 1991: 242).

He accepted the offer (her autobiography ends at this point), and they started living together with three conditions: to live as comrades, to forget her femininity when it comes to action, to cease the cohabitation immediately if either Pak or Fumiko cooperated with the authorities (Kaneko 2006/13: 305). They founded *Futei-sha*, a young anarchist study group of mostly Korean in Japan, and published magazines to advertise it. In the group, they had a very vague plot to bomb a prince of the Japanese empire which failed later because of the trust issue between members (Kaneko 2006/13: 312–3). Hatsuyo and her boyfriend Kim, whom Pak asked to buy the bomb, didn’t trust Pak and threatened him with a knife. The dispute was ultimately ended by Fumiko’s scolding: “if you want to fight, go fight somewhere else!”

## **Death Sentence and Suicide**

In 1923, there was a major earthquake in Tokyo in which about 100,000 people were killed. However, what is more horrible is that many Korean survivors were massacred after the earthquake. Japanese vigilantes who believed in the completely nonsensical rumor of Korean people poisoning well water initiated the genocide. It was a repulsive situation in which some Koreans who evacuated to police stations were massacred by vigilantes who ran to the stations. Additionally, the Japanese government used the chaos to eliminate anarchists; Osugi Sakae and his wife Itoh Noe (and their 6- year-old nephew) were kidnapped by MPs and secretly massacred.

In this chaotic situation, Fumiko, Pak, and members of *Futei-sha* were suddenly arrested. In the detention period, Hatsuyo, who was mentally and physically fragile and died two months later, testified that Pak and Fumiko plotted to bomb the prince. Despite that there was no physical evidence, they were convicted as *Taigyaku-zai*, the crime of harming Japanese royal family, in which the only penalty was the death penalty (11 innocent socialists including Kotoku Shusui and Kanno Suga had been sentenced via this crime). During the trial, Fumiko wholeheartedly expressed her philosophy which I will examine shortly. Though her sentence was pardoned with the death of the emperor, Fumiko killed herself in prison. Pak survived in prison and went back to Korea when he was freed by the US army.

## **2. Philosophy**

Given the fact that she acted as an anarchist for only one year, she was not able to be thoroughly committed to anarchism in practice. Rather, she should be treated as a philosopher who showed a very unique individualistic anarchism in her writings and testimonies, which had been developed through her life rather than through theoretical study (Kaneko 2006/13: 335–6).

## The Ego Awakens

Fumiko described her position as individualistic anarchism in which she rebelled against *power* in order to truly live for herself (Kaneko 2006/13: 337, 351). Exercisers of *power* include her family, job promoters, and the empire. *Power* and its devices such as law or morality alienate one's true motivation as, being in the power of others, one loses freedom and the natural access to one's motivation. For example, being in her family's power, Fumiko lost the access to study and to chat with her friends. One of the most enormous exercises of power is that of the state in which projects of many people including Fumiko and Korean people were alienated and thwarted. We cannot live a true life of our own if we are dominated by *power*.

*I had to be myself. I had been the slave of too many people, the plaything of too many men. I had never lived for myself. I had to do my own work; but what was it? I wanted so badly to find it and to set about accomplishing it.* (Kaneko 1991: 231).

So, we need to deny being in the power of others. How can we do that? Fumiko argued that what we need is to rebel against others' power by acting and saying as we like. She said:

*"Do what I am motivated to do now"; this is the only maxim of my action. (...) When a person wakes up to ego, the state falls. Quite so, I deny all the orders from outside such as state or government but the inner order from my own.* (Kaneko 2006/13: 351; my translation).

This awakening of ego, not a social revolution, is her primarily political objective. She thought that we cannot be free without the ego: social reforms of whatever kind will end up changing one power to another power if people lack the ego (Kaneko 1991: 237). Also, Fumiko was a pessimist as she recognized that there can be no utopia after social revolution, including a Marxist one, where people can coexist peacefully and forget the human nature of possession and violence (Kaneko 2006/13: 346).

However, to follow one's ego is far more difficult than it looks as we often self-deceive. For example, did the Japanese vigilantes who massacred innocent Koreans

follow their ego? Yes, but in a crucially distorted way. They did what they wanted to do but their motivations were distorted by devices of power such as nationalism or racism. In pursuing what they wanted, they were in others' *power*. Therefore, to truly follow one's ego, we need to have shields against this kind of distortion or self-deception.

## The Anarchism of Truthfulness

Fumiko's writings, especially her autobiography, can be read as ones that recognize this problem of distortion and propose a solution to it. The main target of her autobiography seems to be people's *vanity and self-deception*, and her narrative can be read as the story of her becoming independent of others' power by being *truthful* to herself. The crucial opposition working here is that between *vanity* and *truthfulness*. Indeed, she wrote a short poem in prison:

*I want vanity away, truthful to my way* (Kaneko 2006/13: 375; my translation).

Those who oppressed her such as her father, grandmother, christians, socialists and boyfriends were all people of *vanity*. They all did not admit what they truly are and self-deceptively decorated themselves. More precisely, they did not admit the *egoism* of their actions, and, rather, they insisted that their actions were from morality, love, concern for Fumiko, revolution, and justice. They could not admit their weak and egoistic actions and, instead, believed their actions were from such concerns. This is vanity (or self- deception), what Fumiko was most disgusted with from people who had oppressed her:

*Nature! Nature in which there is no deceit! Simple and free, you do not warp a person's soul as humans do.* (Kaneko 1991: 94).

*Why did these people have to be so crude and vain? (...) The differences between us were becoming all too painfully clear, and the desire for a life of my own, apart from them, was growing stronger and stronger.* (Kaneko 1991: 151).

*Was what Christianity taught really true? Was it not just something to anesthetize people's hearts? If sincerity and love were unable to change people and make the world a better place to live, that kind of teaching was only deception.* (Kaneko 1991: 203).

Their vanity was given by their dependence on the external powers. As Fumiko's father believed in the power of supernatural luck and Fumiko's mother depended on men, people tend to be dependent on external powers such as morality, god, and states. So, vanity appears when people resort to those external powers. People hide their egoism by using these external authorities or powers.

How can we, then, be free of vanity? Fumiko, through her life, came to believe that only *truthfulness* can cure this. That is, *truthfulness* as an incessant attempt to be true to oneself without any deception. For her, this *truthfulness* includes the recognition that humans including herself are egoistic in nature, the acceptance that one's life can conflict even with that of one's comrades, and the resignation that people cannot be both truthful and peacefully coexisting in certain societies (Kaneko 2006/13: 351–4). Therefore, she became an anarchist to rebel against the Japanese empire because she could not remain truthful in the state. Also, truthfulness gave her the strength to fight against the power alone. It seemed that the anchorage of her courage against power was her belief that the power is full of deceit while Fumiko herself was free of it. Truth can be a powerful weapon against the deceitful power, as Noe Itoh, a female anarchist of Fumiko's contemporary, wrote to a Japanese minister:

*You are the ruler of a country but are weaker than me.* (Itoh 2019: 255; my translation).

In summary, I read Fumiko as proposing the idea of *the anarchism of truthfulness* in which we rebel against and get revenge on those powers which force us to deceive ourselves, believing our own truthfulness. *The Anarchism of truthfulness* seems to have three features. First, truthfulness as *awareness*: being truthful to oneself, one can have awareness that social power deceives oneself via ideology. Attempting to find an authentic self, Fumiko found that she was alienated through sexist and fascist power. Second, truthfulness as a *weapon*: knowing the deceit of power, one can fight against power courageously. Fumiko rightly believed that the Japanese empire is based on lies, and this belief gave her a courage to stand against the power alone. Third, truthfulness as *hope*: in search of one's true life, one can have hope for the future world. Despite being desperate

about her society, Fumiko believed that she could live a true life of her own and took actions towards it. However, it should be noted that the society Fumiko lived in killed her hope.

The society was so unbearably full of deceptions in which people were dependent on powers of nationalism, capitalism, sexism, racism and morality. Though the form of society has been changed, these powers are still ubiquitous. Fumiko died alone in prison, but she had left her gift: she gave us the truthful work of her own which teaches us why we should fight against deceitful powers.

In this article, I have seen Fumiko's life and philosophy. Oppressed by her family, society, and the state, Fumiko realized that she could live for herself only by being truthful to herself, and that, to be truthful, she had to rebel against power which deceived her. I summarized her position as *the anarchism of truthfulness* which bases anarchism on truthfulness. According to this anarchism, one should stand against deceitful power if one lives for oneself. I believe this deep connection between true life, truthfulness, and anarchism which Fumiko argued for is still important and relevant for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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