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Male or Female: Pick Your Poison

A Microreading of Shinichi Hoshi's "Bokko-Chan"

In Shinichi Hoshi's short story "Bokko-Chan," a barmaster builds a female robot and sets her up as a bartender in his bar. He designs her meticulously, giving her the ability to drink, which he then uses as a method to take advantage of his customers. After Bokko-Chan drinks anything, he siphons the drink out of her in order to re-serve the alcohol without anyone knowing. The design and function of Bokko-Chan seems to be the focus of the story. Hoshi spends a significant amount of time describing her physical appearance and the way that she interacts with the customers. On the surface, Hoshi seems to emphasize how women are used--Bokko-Chan is a tool used by both the barmaster for his purposes and the customers for their purposes. However, the ending of the story suggests that men are actually the ones who become most vulnerable to manipulation, stressing how the way men need to define themselves by their power over women is what ultimately leads to their defeat.

Bokko-Chan is created to reflect the male image of an ideal woman. When designing the robot, the barmaster focuses on creating her youthful and beautiful exterior. However, Hoshi notes that: "the trouble was that she looked a little prissy, but who can deny that a prissy air is an indispensable prerequisite for beauty" (Hoshi,

p. 47). The assumption that being prissy is a necessary component of beauty is an unusual one to make. Prissiness normally has a negative connotation, meaning that someone is overly prim and proper. However, Hoshi emphasizes that to the men in the story, to be beautiful also means that Bokko-Chan must always be predictable. In this world, the ideal woman should not be emotional. Hoshi explains how: “Bokko-Chan never objected to a drink. Nor did she ever become intoxicated” (Hoshi, p. 49). When people drink, they lower their inhibitions and often do become emotional. The men remain happy because Bokko-Chan’s lack of emotion allows the men to avoid dealing with vulnerabilities. Bokko-Chan seems to remain easily controlled by the barmaster, and she exists to be controlled by men as they drink and chat with her at their leisure.

The superficial manner in which the men in the story view Bokko-Chan goes beyond her appearance; the way Bokko-Chan is intellectually powerless seems to further suggest that men hold the power to manipulate her. Bokko-Chan lacks a complex brain and the ability to think for herself--she can only rephrase what she hears. Ironically, this comes from the fact that the barmaster didn’t possess the ability himself to create something complex. Despite this, the men describe Bokko-Chan as “smart to chat with” (Hoshi, p. 49) and as having a “steady character” (Hoshi, p. 50). Bokko-Chan can only echo back what men say to her because she is a robot. However, because not a single man at the bar realizes this, the way they interact with her throughout the story reflects the way they would interact with human women. The fact that Bokko-Chan is not able contribute her own ideas only enhances her popularity with the customers; the male customers like the

steadiness of controlling the conversation and do not value a world where women emphasize their own thoughts and emotions.

It's telling that Bokko-Chan's inability to express her own emotions--which once made her so popular--ultimately leads to everybody's demise. One of the customers who frequents the bar repeatedly tries to get Bokko-Chan to go out with him and quickly racks up a debt. When the customer tells Bokko-Chan that this must be his last visit, he says:

“Are you sad?”

“I am sad.”

“In reality, you are not, are you?”

“In reality, I am not.”

“No other girl is as cold-hearted as you.” (Hoshi, p. 51)

Here the customer still leads the conversation; Bokko-Chan is still limited to mirroring what the man is saying. This is emphasized through the language itself throughout the story, as the conversation remains plain and full of short phrases. But now, the power the man had from controlling the conversation comes back to haunt him when he cannot get what he wants. Hoshi suggests the real truth: that men want to have it both ways, maintaining control but still seeking an emotional response when it benefits them. Hoshi further emphasizes Bokko-Chan's seemingly “coldheartedness” by calling the story “the story of the B-girl who didn't have a heart of gold.” The author emphasizes the ludicrous and impossible contradictions for women in the subtitle of his story, drawing a contrast to contrasting this against how the men are able to avoid consciously taking responsibility for their actions. However, the men are vulnerable in the end: the customer then ends up poisoning her drink,

which the barmaster then redistributes to everyone in the bar, including himself. The barmaster, who once held the power to manipulate both Bokko-Chan and his customers, has now been manipulated into killing himself, too. He doesn't have anyone to blame for his demise but himself--there was no professional pressure forcing him to make Bokko-Chan in the first place. It was a hobby he chose to pursue. The way the men in the story seem to believe they held the power to get Bokko-Chan to do what they want ends up backfiring on them.

Hoshi leaves his readers with a haunting feeling of silence as Bokko-Chan is the last one left standing. The overconfidence that the men in this story have in their ability to manipulate Bokko-Chan does end up leading to their downfall. However, the men in this story only think about their treatment of Bokko-Chan in relation to their own actions. With this, Hoshi suggests that until the men are able to confront their behavior towards Bokko-Chan with empathy for Bokko-Chan herself, this cycle is bound to continue. The men will come and go and fall, but Bokko-Chan will forever be stuck waiting for the next man to poison her.

Works Cited

Hoshi, Shinichi. "Bokko-Chan" (1963). *The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*. Eds. John L Apostolou and Martin Harry Greenberg. New York: Dembner Books, 1989. 47-51.