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On the depiction of love between girls across cultures: Comparing the U.S. American webcomic *YU+ME: dream* and the *yuri* manga “Maria-sama ga miteru”

Verena MASER

In recent years, the portrayal of sexuality in manga¹ has attracted much academic research (e.g. Horii 2009, Levi, McHarry and Pagliassotti 2008). Attention was especially given to the depiction of love between boys in manga, a genre mostly referred to as *boys' love*.

On the contrary, love between girls, the so called *yuri* [lily] genre, did not arouse much scholarly interest. This genre has hitherto been almost exclusively explained in terms of lesbian sexuality (e.g. Welker 2006) despite the fact that most works of

¹ In this paper, the term “manga” is used to denote comics created by Japanese artists in Japanese, published in Japan for a Japanese audience.

this genre do not feature homosexual² characters. The underlying expectation or maybe even intercultural misunderstanding is that fictional works about love between female characters always include a discussion about sexuality. This might be true in a U.S.American or European context, but as my analysis will show it is not always true in a Japanese context.

The aim of my paper is to examine if and how issues of female sexual identity are depicted in the products of U.S. American and Japanese popular culture, namely webcomics³ and manga. Due to restrictions of space, I will limit my intercultural comparison to one manga and one U.S. American webcomic with a textual analysis especially focusing on characters and their representation.⁴ I will show that while the manga art style crosses cultural borders, the content does not.

I chose two comics that at first glance might seem hardly comparable at all. On the one hand, this is the U.S. American webcomic *YU+ME: dream* whose author Megan Rose Gedris might best be called an amateur comic artist working in the field of webcomics since 2004. Her depiction of love between girls reflects U.S.-American ideas on this topic but was at the same time inspired by Japanese yuri manga and can therefore be said to be a hybrid product. On the other hand I use a manga published in a mainstream manga magazine in Japan, “Maria-sama ga miteru” (En.: Maria Watches Over Us), which can be termed the most popular yuri series of the last ten years in Japan. While this manga was originally created in Japan for a Japanese audience, it has nevertheless crossed cultural boundaries by being exported to Asia, North America and Europe. My comparison of these two works offers a “clash of cultures” useful to highlight cultural differences not visible in other ways.

1. *YU+ME: dream*

The two-part U.S. American webcomic *YU+ME: dream* by Megan Rose Gedris⁵ ran from June 2004 to October 2010 on her website. Later, she also self-published in bookform. Four volumes have been released so far, with volumes one to three covering the first part of *YU+ME: dream*. I will limit my remarks to this first part, as it

² “Homosexuality” in this paper is broadly understood as sexual attraction towards a person of the same sex. It is also my understanding that it is connected to the notion of a sexual identity. Therefore, in order to “be” homosexual, you will have to define yourself as such.

³ “Webcomic” in this paper is used to denote a comic first published on a website.

⁴ A deeper analysis of the yuri genre is the topic of my PhD thesis called *Love between girls in manga. Yuri – formation of a genre*. It will specifically focus on contents, production and reception of yuri manga and will contain an analysis of yuri manga as well as interviews with yuri manga editors and fans. For a discussion of sexuality between female characters in manga, see my paper Maser 2011.

⁵ Gedris is a freelance webcomic artist and *YU+ME: dream* was her first long-running webcomic.

is the one most influenced by manga. Furthermore the second part has a different setting and set of topics than the first one.

Part one of *YU+ME: dream* consists of nine issues⁶ and tells the story of Fiona Thompson, who, in the beginning, is an underdog at her school. She has no friends and is frequently sentenced to clean the girls' bathroom. Then one day, a girl named Lia Riolo moves into the house next door. They become friends and, in the course of the story, lovers.

In an email interview, Gedris told me that her story was inspired by yuri manga, a subgenre of *shōjo manga* [manga for girls]. Generally speaking, this genre deals with love and/or romance between girls. The word yuri literally means “lily” and was created by Itō Bungaku, editor of Japan’s first gay magazine *Bara-zoku* [Rose Clan], to denote love between women as antonym to *bara* [rose] with which he meant love between men (Yamada 2005: 29). Yuri manga have been evident from at least 1971 when female artist Yamagishi Ryōko’s “Shiroi heya no futari” [The two girls in the white room] was first published in Shūeisha’s *shōjo* manga magazine *Ribon* [ribbon] (Fujimoto 2008: 247–249).⁷

Gedris enjoyed reading yuri manga but at one point received the impression that the stories became predictable and so she decided to create her own comic.⁸ The earlier issues of *YU+ME: dream* especially are influenced by manga art style⁹: the drawings are kept in black and white with the usage of (digital) screentones to indicate grey. Additionally, the division of pages into panels does not follow a rigid pattern with, for example, three rows with three panels each. Gedris occasionally also draws super-deformed versions of her characters, ones which are caricatures with oversized heads and chubby limbs (see for example Gedris 2004–2010: 19). Finally, the character Lia

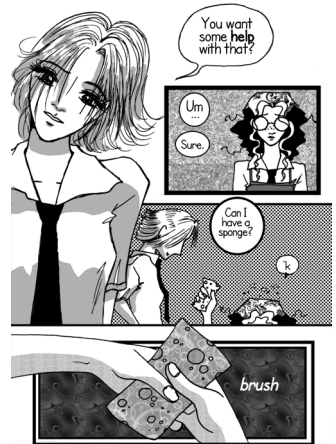


Fig. 1: Manga-inspired drawing style in *YU+ME: dream*. Source: Gedris, Megan Rose: *YU+ME: dream*©, Part one, Issue 2, p. 33, <http://rosalarian.com/yume/?p=98>

6 Even though the comic was published online, Gedris divided it into “issues” of various lengths mirroring the common practice of the U.S. American comic book industry.

7 The usage of the term yuri to denote these manga only became widely used around the year 2000 (Yamada 2005: 29), yet it remains unclear where and when exactly this started.

8 From an email interview in August 2009

9 The art style changes over time – later issues and especially part two very much differ from the art style used in the beginning. Gedris herself states that she was also inspired by non-manga artists such as Naomi Nowak (from afore-mentioned interview).

is depicted with big eyes, as commonly found in shōjo manga (see fig. 1).

Additionally, issues one to five explicitly reference manga, since every frontispiece says the copyright is with “anonymous manga and rosalarian”¹⁰ (see for example Gedris 2004–2010: 40). One should also note the wordplay in the title *YU+ME: dream*. “YU+ME” can be read as “You and Me”, but it is also a reference to the Japanese word *yume*, which means “dream”. Gedris says this is no coincidence, as she “started the comic on the tail end of [...her, V.M.] total obsession with manga” (from afore-mentioned interview).

2. “Maria-sama ga miteru”

Originally a light novel¹¹ series by female author Konno Oyuki,¹² “Maria-sama ga miteru” has been in publication since 1997 in Japan by Shūeisha and counts thirty-eight volumes, as of April 2011.¹³ A manga version by female artist Nagasawa Satoru¹⁴ ran from 2003 to 2007 in Shūeisha’s shōjo manga magazines *Margaret* and *Za Māgaretto* [the Margaret]. It was published in eight paperback volumes and later re-published in five bunkobon¹⁵ paperback volumes. Due to the upcoming release of the live action movie, a new instalment of the manga ran in *Za Māgaretto* in 2010 and volume nine was published later that year (citations here refer to the nine-volume edition). The movie itself was released in Japan in November 2010. The anime¹⁶ version of the series counts four seasons so far and at this point is the only version of the series that has been officially translated into English. Both manga and novel however, are being published in Taiwan, South Korea and Germany.¹⁷

¹⁰ Rosalarian is Gedris’s pen name.

¹¹ In Japan, the term light novel denotes novels for a teenage audience, usually published in the small A6 format, with depictions of manga characters on the frontispiece. Inside, illustrations can be found too. The original illustrator of “Maria-sama ga miteru”, for example, is a woman called Hibiki Reine. Yet contrary to what might be expected, light novels do not have any characteristic contents or narrative modes (for details see Enomoto 2008).

¹² Oyuki is a light novel author who debuted in 1993. “Maria-sama ga miteru” is her third long-running light novel series.

¹³ Occasionally, additional stories are published in Shūeisha’s bimonthly light novel magazine *Cobalt*. Those are later added to the regular novels. The novel itself is published under Shūeisha’s light novel label *Kobaruto bunko* [Cobalt library].

¹⁴ Nagasawa is a shōjo manga artist publishing in the shōjo manga magazines *Margaret* and *Za Māgaretto*. “Maria-sama ga miteru” was her first long-running manga series.

¹⁵ *Bunkobon* are smaller (usually A6 format) than normal manga paperbacks and tend to have twice as many pages. In general, two normal manga paperback volumes are republished into one bunkobon paperback volume.

¹⁶ “Anime” in this paper means animation made in Japan in Japanese language for a Japanese audience.

¹⁷ However, publication of the German version of the novel was discontinued after volume five, probably due to lacking success and volume nine of the manga has not been translated to date either.

“Maria-sama ga miteru” might be seen as just another shōjo manga yet especially in Japan a consensus has developed that this series belongs to the yuri genre. This is visible in a survey among readers of the Japanese yuri manga magazine *Komikku yuri hime* [Comic Lily Princess] who elected the series second best yuri work of 2006 (Sugino 2008: 141) as well as the fact that it was the boom of “Maria-sama ga miteru” that originally inspired the foundation of the first (and now defunct) Japanese yuri manga magazine *Yuri shimai* [Lily Sisters] (Yamada 2005: 29). Not least, the series is also considered a yuri work by Japanese scholars researching the genre (e.g. Kumata 2005: 88–95).

The main character of “Maria-sama ga miteru” is sixteen year old Fukuzawa Yumi, who is in the first year of high school at the Lilian Girls’ Academy. Her long-term idol is second year student Ogasawara Sachiko. When Sachiko tries to evade starring in the stage play *Cinderella*, she asks Yumi, who is only accidentally present, to become her *petite sœur* [little sister]¹⁸ and take the role. Yumi in the end accepts the proposal and thereby joins the students’ council *Yamayurikai* [Assembly of the Lilium auratum]. The manga follows the first year of Yumi at the school and the relationships between the eight members of the students’ council.

In this coming of age manga, love between girls plays an important role. The main protagonist Yumi is in love with Sachiko but the series for example also depicts the sometimes complicated relationship between Yoshino and Rei (vols 2 and 6), the tragic love story of Sei and Shiori (vol. 3), as well as the blossoming relationship between Shimako and Noriko (vol. 9). However, one should keep in mind that “Maria-sama ga miteru” is thought of belonging to the category *yūjō ijō koibito miman* [more than friends but less than lovers] (Yamada 2005: 29). While these girls certainly have intense feelings for each other, one should not expect an open depiction of this affection by, for example, kisses. This ambiguity can, in part, be attributed to the manga’s usage of the Japanese verb *suki* which can be translated as either “to like” or “to love”. A case in point is the following scene from volume one (fig. 2): Yumi and Sei are searching for Sachiko, who is nowhere to be found.

Yumi is anxious to be the first to find her so Sei asks her for the reason: “Do you *suki* Sachiko...?” (vol. 1, p. 130), to which Yumi nods in reply. Yet the question remains whether Sei is referring to “like” or to “love” and it is also unclear which of the meanings Yumi’s nodding is referring to. This is even more complicated by the fact that Sei goes on to state that she and the *Yamayurikai* are feeling the same way and

¹⁸ The school is organized along the lines of the *sœur seido* [sister system], where younger students become the “little sisters” of older students and are guided through life at school by them.



Fig. 2: Ambiguity of the word *suki* in "Maria-sama ga miteru". Konno Yuki, "Maria-sama ga miteru", 2004, p. 130.

that all of them do *daisuki* Sachiko (vol. 1, p. 130). *Daisuki* means "very much *suki*", but it is still left to the reader's interpretation which kind of *suki* is being referred to.

This subtle depiction of love between girls shows that the yuri genre is not defined by the intensity of romantic feelings and might explain why there is no clear-cut definition of what precisely yuri is. For the most part, it is up to the reader to decide what he/she perceives as yuri. Fans in the U.S. and Europe tend to draw a distinction between yuri with which they mean "manga about love between girls with sexual contents", and *shōjo ai* [girl love], which to them means "manga about love between girls without sexual contents".¹⁹ Yet in Japan, such a distinction does not exist²⁰ not least because the term *shōjo ai* seems to be connected to adults' paedophilic attraction to young girls.²¹

3. Comparing *YU+ME: dream* to "Maria-sama ga miteru"

Even though there are differences regarding art and storyline between *YU+ME: dream* and "Maria-sama ga miteru", there are some similarities regarding the setting. First of all, the main characters are girls in their teens. "Maria-sama ga miteru" goes even one step further. Since its setting is an all-girls school, one hardly finds any male characters at all. There are some exceptions, like Yumi's younger brother who appears in some chapters, but the focus clearly is on the female characters. A second parallel between the two comics is the fact that the setting is identical. In both cases, it is a catholic high school with nuns as teachers.²² All students have to wear a school

19 See for example the sub-division of the large English-language forum of the Shoujo-Ai Archive (Shoujo-Ai Archive 2011, internet).

20 In Japan, alongside yuri there is also the term *gāruzu rabu* [girls' love] or *GL* which is mostly used as an antonym of *boizu rabu* [boys' love] or *BL*. Yet it seems that there is no qualitative difference between the terms yuri and *GL*, so that both tend to be used interchangeably.

21 Unfortunately, there seems to be no scholarly research available on this term but since it is not mentioned in Japanese dictionaries it can be deemed as not being standard Japanese vocabulary. However, sites on the Japanese internet unanimously link it with pedophilia or the phenomenon of *lolicon* [Lolita complex, adult men attracted to young girls]. This is also true for a book called *Shōjo ai* (Miyajima 2005), to which Japan's National Diet Library assigned the keyword *ijō seiyoku* [abnormal sexuality] (NACSIS Webcat 2011, internet). In any case, in Japan *shōjo ai* is not connected to manga or anime about love between girls.

22 My research suggests that the setting of a school or even an all-girls school is a common feature in many of today's yuri manga.

uniform, which is rather unusual for a U.S.-American high school, though not so much for a Japanese high school.²³ The similarities end here, though. Much more striking are the differences between the two works.

One of the main contrasts is the way in which the characters define themselves and their sexual orientation. *YU+ME: dream* depicts self-definitions that are strongly influenced by the sexual orientation of the respective characters. The fact that they see themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual is one of the driving factors behind the story. For example, defining herself as lesbian makes it easier for Fiona to connect with Jake, a gay classmate of hers. And when she comes out to the head nun Sister Mary (Gedris 2004–2010: 359), it is the first time in the story that Fiona stands up for herself. Her self-definition as lesbian can therefore be seen as a means of empowerment.

As opposed to this, in “Maria-sama ga miteru” none of the characters defines herself as lesbian or bisexual, even though some relationships go beyond the point of being “just friends”. Remarkably however, you also won’t find any self-definition as “heterosexual”. I would therefore argue that in this manga, the sex of the person the characters fall in love with is less important than the fact that they love that person and also that a sexual identity of whatever kind is not a necessary precondition for this love. Therefore this is not a manga about sexual identity but about growing up and coming to terms with one’s feelings and emotions.

Predictably, the way in which the characters define themselves also influences the way in which they react to themselves falling in love with another girl. *YU+ME: dream* depicts a sort of “classical” pattern of coming out narratives, that is, confusion. When Fiona accidentally sees Lia coming out of the shower, for days she is unable to sleep (Gedris 2004–2010: 70–73). At the end of issue three, she stares in the mirror, startled and confused: “As much as it scares me... I think... ...I might... ...be gay.” (Gedris 2004–2010: 86–87).

In “Maria-sama ga miteru”, on the other hand, the characters do not see themselves as having a distinct kind of sexual orientation. Therefore, all feelings connected to the discovery of being “different” from the other girls around them are missing. The characters show no feelings of shame for their love and no confusion about their identity. Instead you see other emotions, for example Yumi blushing because she is close to her idol Sachiko (vol. 1, p. 53).

Differences in the depiction of love between girls in these two comics are

²³ Yet one might argue that it is less “sexy” in the case of “Maria-sama ga miteru” because the skirts and blouses are much longer than the ones seen in *YU+ME: dream*.

also visible in the reactions of the characters' social environment. As for fellow pupils and classmates, one can see that in *YU+ME: dream*, reactions are mixed. On the one hand, there are a lot of negative reactions ranging from harassing graffiti, like "Fiona Thompson is a LESBO!" (Gedris 2004–2010: 139, emphasis in the original) to insulting comments like "Ew! I have gym with her! She was probably *watching* me in the showers! Gross! Oh, I'm gonna puke!" (Gedris 2004–2010: 373, emphasis in the original) or "She's a lezzie? That's *hott* [sic]! Woo!" (Gedris 2004–2010: 373, emphasis in the original). These reactions are examples of stereotypical attitudes towards lesbian women: they are either sexual predators looking for sex with every woman in their vicinity, or they are sexual objects, whose sexual encounters are to be enjoyed by male viewers. Yet there are also supportive characters. It is notable that those are mostly ones who define themselves as gay, like Fiona's friends Jake and Don, or Fiona's uncle. In general, once they find out, Fiona loving Lia and both of them being girls is a big topic for their classmates.

In "Maria-sama ga miteru" however, the vast majority of pupils and classmates show no reaction at all. If they do, they are either supportive or jealous. When Yumi declines Sachiko's offer to become her *sœur*, she is told by another girl that she would be happy if Yumi accepted (vol. 1, p. 82). Yumi is also offered help for preparing her Valentine's Day gift for Sachiko and their first date (see vols 5 and 6). On the other hand, Yumi's future petite *sœur* Tōko becomes jealous and runs out of the room crying when she hears of the blossoming relationship between her idol Shimako and her friend Noriko (vol. 9, pp. 51–54). While the fact that one girl likes or loves another girl is a topic for fellow pupils and classmates, the fact that both are of the same sex (and in most cases also the same gender) is not.

As for the reactions of parents and teachers, *YU+ME: dream* presents them mainly opposed to the relationship. The head nun Sister Mary bears a grudge against Fiona from the beginning of the story, because she sees her as nothing more than a troublemaker. When Fiona comes out to her, she is unhappy because due to state regulations she cannot punish her (Gedris 2004–2010: 360). However, she hands the news to Fiona's parents, who deal with the situation in their own way. Her stepmother is mainly enraged because she considers Fiona "engaging in immoral activities" (Gedris 2004–2010: 367). Her father, on the other hand, thinks it would be worse if she were into drugs (Gedris 2004–2010: 367).

In "Maria-sama ga miteru", reactions of parents and teachers are again rare which is partly explained by the fact that neither of them gets to play a big part in the

story. In general, they too show no particular reaction. Only once a teacher gives a small hint about what she is thinking. When the character Sei is in her second year, she falls in love with her classmate Shiori. When Shiori ends the relationship, Sei's grades are getting worse and she is called in for a guidance talk. At the end, a nun says to her: "Isn't it sad to fall for just one thing and lose sight of your surroundings?" (vol. 3, p. 189). To the nun, Sei's love seems to be an obstacle for good grades, even though she admits that "only studying is not everything in school life" (vol. 3, p. 189). However, she is not generally opposed to the idea that Sei has a close relationship with another girl.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the flow of the manga art style in this case crossed cultural borders, but the contents of the stories remained country-specific. *YU+ME: dream* follows a coming out narrative (discovery of sexual identity—confusion and doubt—first homosexual relationship and at the same time overcoming difficulties like the rejection by parents and friends) and thereby specifically discusses the process of accepting that one is gay and coming out in public. The obstacles shown are occurring in the U.S. which is why conclusions about homosexuals in today's U.S.-American society may be drawn from this webcomic. "Maria-sama ga miteru" however could be said to be merely a variation of the "boy-meets-girl"²⁴ pattern, in this case: girl meets girl—during the course of the story, they fall in love—happy ending. To draw conclusions about homosexuals in Japan from the depiction of love between girls in this manga would be misleading. Through this comparison of *YU+ME: dream* and "Maria-sama ga miteru" it should therefore have become clear that today's yuri genre does not necessarily thematise homosexuality.

Nonetheless, it is possible to infer that in the U.S. and Japan, different kinds of contents are seen as acceptable entertainment. As I mentioned earlier, "Maria-sama ga miteru" has been a tremendous success in Japan, with females as with males (Sugino 2008: 107 and 137). Yet in the U.S. and Germany, it has not been able to attract an equally large audience and the same is true for other yuri manga. I suppose that one of the reasons is that readers of yuri manga in western countries expect a coming out narrative when they read a story about love between girls. An explanation might be that many of them define themselves as non-heterosexual and read these comics in order to find out how others cope with their sexual identity. Japanese readers of the

²⁴ Definition according to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary: "relating to a story, book or film whose main subject is romance" (CALD 2011, internet).

yuri genre, on the other hand, are mostly heterosexual women and men. They seem to want just a love story without having to think about political implications. They are probably looking for distraction from everyday life. One should also be aware of the fact that in Japan, the sexual orientation does not seem to be considered a major part of one's identity²⁵ (McLelland 2000: 2).

So even though two things look similar and might even have similar contents, it is still necessary to be aware of differences stemming from the cultural context in which they were made. As Stuart Hall (1992) reminds us, media products are encoded in a specific way by their producers but this might not be the same way they are decoded by their consumers. A further analysis of how fans around the world appropriate the manga art style to express themselves (encode) and how these comics are read (decoded) in other countries, Japan or elsewhere would therefore be important.

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²⁵ It also seems to be questionable whether the notion of "identity" is actually useful in a Japanese context. The Japanese expression for "identity", *aidentitī*, was evidently taken from English, and as research reveals, today it is understood by less than one in four Japanese (Clarke 2009: 60 and 74).

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With thanks to Jaqueline Berndt for additional comments.

Biography

Verena Maser (born in 1984) is a PhD student of the department of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, Germany and a PhD fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo. Her research interests include popular culture (manga and other comics, anime, TV series), girls' culture and early 20th century Japan.
email: verena.maser@googlemail.com

