



# Disciplined Bodies And Silent Revolts: A Foucauldian Reading Of Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts And Eggs*

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## Abstract

This story bends around bodies, especially how they hold stories of strength, self and choice. From a place shaped by men's rules, money demands and family expectations in today's Japan, it asks what being a woman is. Using ideas about control, watching eyes and living under systems, the book follows Makiko, Midoriko and Natsuko – each one pushing against limits while searching for space to breathe. What hurts and stays unsaid shows up just as loud as words do. Their skin remembers, their tiredness speaks and joy slips through anyway. Thought runs deep here but never forgets the salt on lips after crying, meals eaten alone, dreams whispered at night. Flesh becomes thought when Kawakami meets Foucault. Her sentences breathe life into rigid ideas; instead of shouting, rebellion hums beneath skin. Bodies stop being controlled things. They start remembering. Quiet moments hold power. Seeing each other clearly – this reshapes existence. Endurance speaks louder than outrage. Awareness grows in stillness. Renewal hides in ordinary acts.

**Keywords:** Female body, body politics, Foucault, biopower, resistance and feminism

## Introduction

What decides what happens to a woman's body? That question pulses through *Breasts and Eggs* by Mieko Kawakami. Three lives carry the weight of it – the life of a mother barely scraping by, her teenage girl who does not speak and also her sister who watches herself too closely. Together, their paths show quiet forces at work, unseen but never harmless, shaping how women move, look and live. Japan today forms the backdrop, yet the pressure reaches far past home walls. Standards of prettiness, rules about having children, jobs split along gender lines – all tighten around choice. One way to grasp this web is through Michel Foucault's ideas on power over the body. In books like *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault shows power today works quietly, not through violence, instead shaping lives via rules, systems and everyday habits – people start watching themselves without being told. Kawakami's female characters exist inside these invisible structures, still managing moments of pushback despite them. Resistance for them is never loud triumphs, just bodily choices made to keep going: staying quiet, turning away, choosing another path. What happens in *Breasts and Eggs* becomes a stage where the body stands caught – pressed down by control, yet somehow rising as defiance.

## Research Objectives:

1. To understand how Foucault's discipline, surveillance and biopower can shed light on the everyday ways women experience and think about their bodies in *Breasts and Eggs*.
2. To explore how Kawakami shows women trying to claim control over their own lives and bodies and quietly resist the social and cultural expectations placed on them in contemporary Japan.
3. To show how the novel turns abstract theories of power into emotional and lived human experiences.
4. To contribute to feminist literary studies by connecting Japanese women's writing to wider global debates on the politics of the female body.

## Research Methodology

1. The study uses a Foucauldian and feminist approach to read the novel.
2. It closely examines *Breasts and Eggs*, focusing on changes in narrative voice, imagery, dialogue and how bodies communicate meaning beyond the physical.
3. Short quotations with page references are used to show how language creates authority or quietly resists it.
4. The analysis draws on theories of surveillance, control and self-formation, especially from thinkers such as Bartky, Bordo and Butler.
5. Existing critical studies on Kawakami's work are also used to guide and strengthen the interpretation.

## Literature Review

What if power isn't just laws and rules? Michel Foucault made people rethink control by showing how it slips into daily habits. Not from courts or police alone, but through small repeated actions that shape posture, choices, urges and self-image. His book *Discipline and Punish* paints bodies as moulded - made flexible and obedient by schedules, stares, norms. Then comes *The History of Sexuality*, where attention shifts: now life itself is managed. Populations are steered via sex, illness, and birth rates. Control spreads softly, invisibly. Suddenly, a woman's body isn't just hers. It becomes a site where larger forces play out, silently but constantly.

Feminist writers pushed Foucault's ideas deeper, revealing how sharply control lands on women. What he called the "disciplined body" tends to be female – watched closely, adjusted often, measured against ideals set by society. Take Sandra Lee Bartky: she shows this regulation hits hardest when appearance becomes a duty. Susan Bordo looks at habits like skipping meals or shaping one's look, seeing them as routines that make women constant watchers of themselves. Instead of freedom, there is scrutiny – built into everyday choices. Then comes Judith Butler, who treats gender not as fixed, but as acted out again and again under invisible scripts. These performances? Shaped long before we choose them. Culture writes the moves; repetition makes them feel real. So what seems personal turns out to be moulded by forces outside any single person. Femininity gets built slowly and silently over time.

People talking about Mieke Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* keep returning to what it feels like to live as a woman. Instead of just summarising plots, they look at how hard it is raising kids alone, scraping by money-wise, hating your reflection and trying to meet beauty standards in modern Japan. Because she wants surgery so badly, readers see Makiko's desire as more than personal – it hints at bodies being bought and sold. On the flip side, Natsuko's doubts around settling down or having children act like quiet resistance against old-fashioned roles. Lately, scholars began linking the book to dropping childbirth numbers and tight rules on reproduction, hearing Kawakami whisper back at society's demands.

Still, even if those feminist views help, not many scholars looked hard at the book using Foucault's thoughts on control, watching others and body-based power. Quiet acts of pushback, the way women start controlling their own behaviour, the reach of systems into personal choices – these parts of power remain partly unseen.

This research moves quietly into uncharted ground. Reading *Breasts and Eggs* through a lens borrowed from Foucault reveals how control sinks beneath words, settling into flesh, speech, craving and even fatigue. What emerges is not just an idea — Kawakami breathes feeling into thought. Her people do not act out theories like scripts; they carry them in their bones. Doubt, embarrassment, yearning, small rebellions whispered under breath — these shape philosophy into something lived. Through its story, the book shows how defiance can be quiet. Not every stand involves shouting or dramatic acts. It hides in stillness, in turning away, in tiny decisions made day after day. Strength appears when someone dares to picture life another way, even if everything around stays broken.

## Research Gap

Nowadays, a novel such as *Breasts and Eggs* still stands out by showing how women carry unseen pressures. Rather than spotlighting duties or appearance, certain views highlight quiet forces that shape daily existence. Still, the weight of unspoken rules lingers beneath ordinary moments. These views matter, yet few dig into the subtle ways pressure settles into daily routines. It sneaks in through habits people monitor themselves, rules disguised as care and unspoken tensions. Rarely do scholars link this quiet shaping to theories about control over bodies. That space between big ideas and personal moments stays mostly empty. By connecting Kawakami's story to thoughts on unseen authority, this work traces how influence lives in gestures, pauses and tiny refusals. Power moves softly, yes — but so does pushback, tucked inside ordinary days.

## Textual Analysis

Her novel *Breasts and Eggs* digs into the lives of Makiko, Midoriko, and Natsuko. The way Makiko fixates on bigger breasts shows how outside pressures shape how we see ourselves. She says again and again, like clockwork, “I’m gonna do it; I’m gonna get big boobs” (Kawakami 17). Her refrain captures Foucault’s idea that discipline produces “docile bodies” that participate in their own regulation (*Discipline* 170). The hostess club where she works enforces the logic of the panopticon: “They won’t let you behind the bar if your face looks tired” (24). The workplace becomes a site of gendered biasing, where the female body is both commodity and instrument.

In contrast to her mother’s noisy self-discipline, Midoriko’s silence embodies defiance. Her diary entry captures her moral rebellion: “It’s not our fault that we have eggs and sperm, but we can definitely try harder to keep them from meeting” (46). By refusing speech, Midoriko seizes a form of autonomy unavailable through language. Her muteness transforms into a “counter-conduct”, a way of saying no to the maternal and social scripts that define femininity.

As the narrator, Natsuko bridges observation and reflection. Her decision to seek pregnancy via donor insemination exposes the state’s biopolitical control over female reproduction. The clinic official tells her, “It’s not that we refuse single women, but the law doesn’t really have a place for you” (214). Bureaucratic neutrality masks exclusion. Natsuko’s inner voice reveals her divided self: “I wanted to have a child, but I didn’t want to have a husband” (221). Her body’s potential for life becomes a site of negotiation, not destiny.

Language itself is corporeal in Kawakami’s world. Natsuko muses, “Words might get across, but not what we’re actually trying to say” (173). When Natsuko says, “I can’t tell where my words end and my body begins” (275), she articulates a feminist reimagining of subjectivity: to write is to reinhabit the body.

Kawakami grounds her philosophy in poverty and work. “We could count the windows of our house on one hand” (32), Natsuko recalls. Makiko’s weary limbs—“her legs buzzed like fluorescent lights” (27)—symbolise labour’s toll on the flesh.

*Breasts and Eggs* closes without triumph, yet its quiet tone is liberating. Natsuko does not resolve her reproductive dilemma; she chooses to live ambiguously: “a life where the days don’t add up to a story” (309).

Makiko's decision to abandon surgery—"I just got tired of thinking about it" (294)—also signifies revolt through fatigue.

## Conclusion

What happens when looking good becomes a rule? For Makiko, it shapes her days. Her daughter Midoriko stops speaking – not out loud, at least – but writes down what she feels. That quiet act says something strong. Natsuko watches herself in mirrors more than she wants to. Choices about motherhood weigh on her like old debts. Work doesn't free them – it adds another layer of rules. Still, each woman finds cracks in the pressure. A pause before answering can be rebellion. Saying nothing might mean everything. Wanting change, even without words, keeps possibility alive. Bodies here aren't just controlled – they remember who they are. Meaning grows in small acts most would overlook. Dignity hides inside doubt. Self comes slowly, shaped by resistance too soft to hear.

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