

Who Is the Futakuchi-Onna and what is her purpose in modern Japanese society?

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The Futakuchi-Onna, literally meaning “two-mouthed woman”, is a type of yōkai that is most notable for a large ravenous mouth that has developed a home, hidden, on the back of a person’s head. The people who are claimed victims by these grotesque second mouths are typically young, married women who have encountered some form of food discrepancy in their lives ([1] *Matthew Meyer, ‘Futakuchi onna’*). Depending on the story one hears, she is sometimes related to an onryō (“vengeful spirit”, a yōkai made through transformation or disease), similar to the Kuchisake-Onna or Rokurokubi. The defining facet of an onryō is their desire/compulsion to hurt the living for reasons based on the causes for their transformation into a yōkai. The reason that the Futakuchi-Onna is not always explicitly considered an onryō would likely be the differences between the two most notable origin stories of this yōkai. In one such story, ([2] *Tōsanjin, ‘Ehon Hyaku Monogatari’ (1841)*), her transformation is caused by the neglect and abuse done by her, inflicted onto her stepdaughter in the form of starvation, to save her own biological daughter from the same fate. In this version, the Futakuchi-Onna could be considered an onryō on the basis that it is the stepdaughter’s spirit that breaches her skull and forms the mouth, forcing the woman to gorge on food and fulfil the needs that had been fatally neglected. The other story, the seemingly more common and/or original folktale, is often dubbed “The Bride Who Doesn’t Need to Eat”. The tale is named this way because it describes the main concept; being that there once was a stingy man that had no wife or children because he could not bear the idea of wasting resources to support them. When he found a woman

fabled to not need to eat, he was elated and chose to marry her. By way of this story, the bride is transformed into a Futakuchi-Onna and found out by her husband when he notices the food stores and been depleting. I would not consider her an onryō, in this case, more than the true victim of the story, especially as she is sometimes killed at the end of some renditions ([3] Josei, 'Futakuchi-onna, the Compulsive Secret Eater'). As this is a folktale, there is no distinct date of publication, but I would presume based on the popular culture of the era that the Futakuchi-Onna rose in popularity, similarly to the previously mentioned onryō, in the height of Sekien's encyclopedias.

On the surface, the Futakuchi-Onna resembles a perfectly normal woman, but in the night or behind closed doors is when her second mouth is revealed, and she begins to feed her appetite worthy of two grown adults. Her reverse mouth is incredibly glutinous, which leads to its desire to binge large amounts of food in quick succession, this fact highlights the Futakuchi-Onna's second most recognizable feature, her hair. The hair of a Futakuchi-Onna is made up of thick, flowing black tendrils that develop sentient power; power to feed the hunger of the second mouth. While this yōkai's own hands tend to her organic body, her hair is released from its styling to shovel piles of food into the second mouth in tandem. Despite the seemingly monstrous capabilities of the second mouth and its tendrils, the original folklore never explicitly describes its use in a violent manner, in fact, she tends to present in quite a tame manner as long as she is fed. The most notable harm she inflicts would be the depletion of food resources in the household.

There are a couple of different ways to analyze the Futakuchi-Onna and what she represents in the grander scheme of things. Some of the analyses are ones that I found within

my research and others are a few of my own interpretations, and they make up quite a variety of origin stories. One of the more obvious potential origins that I found would be the embodiment of greed; whether this is by the stingy husband's effects on his wife, or the act of selfish survival for the wife's daughter, it's clear that the second mouth could portray the repercussions of greed on the woman ([4] 'Futakuchi-onna'). The second is simpler, as it takes a common idea for yōkai that comes from the personifying of repressed emotions or feelings; in this, it would be the suppression of intense hunger that built up within her and overwhelmed her into transformation to fulfil her neglected needs ([5] 'Futakuchi-Onna'). The third is the idea of the Futakuchi-Onna being a reaction to the spousal abuse the woman is put through by the greedy man ([3]).

In my own speculations, I came up with a main two possible origins for what the Futakuchi-Onna may represent. I think the more accepted of the two would be the social expectations of the 'ideal' woman and the pressure put on women to fulfill them. History always tends to repeat itself, and I believe that one habit human society never ceases to rid itself of is the extreme standards put upon women. A woman who says she does not eat to appear more attractive to the public eye or even as a way to attract relationships from men with superficial desires is a groomed response to the social duties they are expected to satisfy. Truly no person is capable of living without sustenance, and to present oneself with such an ability is not for her own sake, but for the sake of her perceived attractiveness. In terms of the Futakuchi-Onna, the consequences of those actions would be manifested into the second mouth, allowing the woman to finally eat like she so desperately needs, away from any lingering eyes. The second theory of mine revolves around the issue of eating disorders. Eating disorders,

in particular Anorexia Nervosa, have been recorded medically as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Japan, and it is described to be a psychological rejection of food and a fear response to the concept of weight gain that was not connected to any other psychological issues. Such an illness can afflict both men and women but was most usually reported in young women during this time and going forward ([6] Uehara T, M.D, Ph.D., *'Past, Current and Future of Anorexia Nervosa in Japan'*). Although it was only within that time that disorders such as anorexia were medically acknowledged, I think it's safe to assume that they had existed far longer than that before gaining any recognition. I do still believe that the previous theory of social pressure would be a prevalent feature here as well, but I think It's important to consider the mental state of the women (or men) facing this condition, as it's not something so controlled. Additionally, these people likely faced public scrutiny for their uncontrollable impulses for avoidance, perhaps rumoured or theorized about; people guessing *why* they acted so differently. I don't think It's so farfetched to consider that the origin of the Futakuchi-Onna may have been a woman such as that, who was merely a victim of dirty gossip.

In media, the Futakuchi-Onna is often used for more of a fantastical character design rather than evolving as a popular character of her own (other than in stories such as Gegege no Kitaro, where she is a direct antagonist). The popular features of her design are used for characters such as Mawile from *Pokémon*, Claire from *Miss Peregrine's School for Peculiar Children*, or Filia and Samson from *Skullgirls*. The characters Filia and Samson are notably different from the other examples as the two of them are actually in a parasitic relationship that merely resembles the Futakuchi-Onna in design rather than structure. I chose to do my research project on the Futakuchi-Onna particularly because of the characters Mawile and Clair, who had

been part of prevalent series from my childhood. Although at the time I didn't truly know their origin, they were both characters that I found immensely interesting, and that interest only grew far larger once being introduced to the world of yōkai. I think she is particularly interesting for the fact that the media that she's found in, she is seldomly titled for the yōkai she is. This, I believe, is a unique facet of the lesser-known modernized yōkai that aren't comparable to those such as Kitsune or Kappa which are openly recognized globally. The Futakuchi-Onna is not often known by name, but by spirit instead.

Citations:

[2] Tōsanjin, 'Ehon Hyaku Monogatari' (1841). <https://pulverer.si.edu/node/972/title> (May 10, 2021)

[4] 'Futakuchi-onna'. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futakuchi-onna> (May 10, 2021)

[5] 'Futakuchi-Onna'.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070227233426/http://www.youkaimura.org/futaku.htm> (May 10, 2021)

[3] Josei, 'Futakuchi-onna, the Compulsive Secret Eater'.

<http://yokaitoons.com/index.php/2020/04/17/futakuchi-onna-the-compulsive-secret-eater/>

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[1] Matthew Meyer, 'Futakuchi onna'. <http://yokai.com/futakuchionna/> (May 10, 2021)

[6] Uehara T, M.D, Ph.D., 'Past, Current and Future of Anorexia Nervosa in Japan'.

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