

# Trends in Present-day Japanese Literature

Shinji Saito

## Diversity in Today's Modern Japanese Literature

Is there anyone who can give a general survey of modern Japanese literature? I thought of literary critics, scholars of Japanese literature and comparative literature, and journalists, but it seems to me that neither one of them will succeed entirely. Take for example the annual catalogue published by the Japan Writer's Association. It has an overview of the year's "literature"; but it is only a collection of articles on the different genres: entertainment, historical fiction, mystery, science fiction, children's literature, non-fiction, poetry, tanka, haiku (Japanese traditional short poetry), literary criticism, drama, etc. Each article is written by a different author.

If we look into one genre, "mystery," we may see that it is divided into sub-genres: detective novels, suspense thrillers, adventure/spy novels, hardboiled novels, court/police novels, the supernatural, parody, horror, fantasy, etc. It is similar to biology having different branches like molecular biology, cell biology, and marine biology. That is to say, one mystery critic cannot keep track of all the trends in the genre "mystery."

Thus, we will learn that "literature of modern Japan" is a field teeming with diversity. It may not be a large field, but within it, novelists remain silent on poetry or haiku; on the other hand, poets do not think of reading modern novels. Authors persist in their own style of literary expression and do not interact with authors in other genres. It is a peculiarity of Japanese culture, called by foreign authors "A Land Where the Spirit of Language Flourishes."

It is true even in my case, who have long worked in the field of literature. For many foreigners, Japanese literature is mostly an unknown area. Even after Yasunari Kawabata and Kenzaburo Oe winning Nobel Prizes for Literature, the readers' awareness has not changed very much.

Although this situation has changed noticeably in the '80s, the view of Japanese literature abroad 40 or 50 years ago was quite poor. According to Jin-ichi Konishi, visiting professor at Stanford University, the most popular dissertations topics in US and European universities at this time were: "renga" (style of poetry popular from 13th to 19th century), *The Tale of Genji*, "noh", then "haiku". No one discussed modern novels. It is impossible to learn about present-day Japan and Japanese through "renga" and *The Tale of Genji*.

## Impression through Translation

*Gunzou*, a literary magazine, had a special feature on "Japanese Literature through Translation" in its September 1990 issue. I remember in particular an article by Margaret Marutani, *From Mishima to Haruki—the Current Situation of Japanese Literature in Translation*. She points out that Japanese novels are understood to pursue the "delicate" and "ethereal" world of beauty, as represented by the 3 authors Yasunari Kawabata, Jun-ichiro Tanizaki, and Yukio Mishima, and give the impression that this style describes the whole of Japanese literature. She states that, after a "period of introduction" it is now necessary to refute the fixed image of their aesthetic world which has been built up over the last 30 years. She further mentions the necessity to break the stereotype of the Japanese woman as "a victim of male society persevering against all hardships" an image solidified

through such '70s novels like *Onnazaka* (Slopes of Women) by Fumiko Enji and *Hanaoka Seishu no Tsuma* (Hanaoka Seishu's Wife) by Sawako Ariyoshi. Foreign readers have had the same exotic impression of Japanese literature, just like that of the Japanese people.

## Start of Modern Society and Present-day Literature

I will now attempt to step back from the overwhelming field of Japanese literature and look at it from a distance. This will illustrate the present framework of Japanese literature. In general, the two main divisions of "pure literature" and "popular entertainment" cannot be seen. The distinction between "pure literature" as elite, ideological and "popular literature (entertainment)" as low, immoral, and without ideology is avoided in the modern standpoint. The breakdown of contrast between pure literature and popular literature comes from structural changes in society, but it has also influenced other areas. Asia vs. West, intellectual vs. populace, modern and indigenous from the political perspective, central vs. periphery, and village vs. city from social structural perspective, industry vs. agriculture—these dichotomies have gradually diminished and finally disintegrated.

This signifies that Japan has completed the process of industrialization in the Western model, and has arrived at the stage of the modern state. Ken-ichi Matsumoto and Saburo Kawamoto both take 1964 as this point, which I see is valid. 1964 was the year that the Olympic Games were held in Tokyo, the year that the bullet train and interstate highways were opened, that the Beatles became popular in Japan—"the start of modern society" according to Kawamoto. "After this point in time, our country is on par with other western countries, having arrived at modernity. Modern society is one where city dwellers have become 'solitary masses', each distinct 'like grains of sand'" from *New Music Hasei-shi Ron, Sono Doujidai teki Kousatsu* (*Development of New Music, Contemporary View*) by Ken-ichi Matsumoto.

When the traditional distinctions between urban vs. rural areas or pure vs. popular literature were valid, traditional society structures like "village" society and "Cold War" also existed. That is to say, the traditional modern concepts could still be used to describe Japanese society. Typically Japanese themes of poverty, unhappiness or parental repression could be used in literature, forming a basis for readers' sympathies. If we call such literature "Post-War Literature," authors like Yutaka Haniya, Hiroshi Noma, Haruo Umezaki, Takehiko Fukunaga, Rinzo Shiina, Taijun Takeda, Shin-ichiro Nakamura would be included here.

If we take into account worldwide events after 1964 like the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Collapse of the Soviet Union, End of the Cold War, development of Japan into an industrialized mass consumption society, and name literature of this period as "Present-day Literature," we may be able to see a rough outline of literary history. The difficulties in understanding "present-day literature" come from the fact that the world depicted is so chaotic, that there is no real life model anywhere in the world. The author has to face the unknown through his/her own creations. A representative of this school is Kenji Nakagami (1946-1992).



"A Wild Sheep Chase" by Haruki Murakami in original and English editions



"Kitchen" in original and English editions



Banana Yoshimoto  
(© Yoshiki Nakano)

## Four Representative Writers of Today

Nakagami won the Akutagawa Prize for his novel *Misaki* in 1975, a story of family and local relationships in his native land Kumano, in Kishu. Through novels like *Karekinada*, a tale of stifling family relationships situated within a mythical time frame, Nakagami has sought to expand the world of fiction. For him, Kumano is "a holy land swaying between life and death." He calls Kishu "a land sunk into darkness since the rise of Jinmu (said to be first emperor in ancient times). The term "Hidden Country" embraces this land which has fallen into darkness." He defines his own literature as one based on coexistence with spirits of the land, following the tradition of classical literature such as *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicle of Japan): "Going from town to town in this dark land, writing down tales as to wake the spirits, is the way of the classics." Nevertheless, his core concept "roji" (side street) could not withstand the wave of modernization and is overwhelmed. In speaking of the disappearance of roji, Nakagami would have confronted modernization face-to-face; but his work remains unfinished due to his untimely death in 1992.

Ryu Murakami (b. 1952) made his debut with *Kagirinaku Tomei ni Chikai Blue* (*Almost Transparent Blue*) which won both the Gunzou Prize for New Writers and the Akutagawa Prize in 1976. In 1980, he published *Coin Locker Babies*, in 1987, *Ai to Genso no Facism* (*Fascism in Love and Fantasy*). *Coin Locker Babies* was a work which he claimed "Through writing it, I was able to gain real confidence in myself." Twin babies found abandoned in a coin locker, Kiku and Hashi grow up to be autistic as children. A psychiatrist makes them listen to sounds from a mother's womb to curb their every impulse. Later, the two are taken to an isolated island in western Kyushu, where they are told, "You are qualified to destroy the world." The two grow up; Kiku accidentally kills their mother to protect Hashi, who has become a singer. Escaping from the juvenile reformatory, Kiku obtains a nerve weapon (gas) "Datula," and scatters it throughout Tokyo. He walks among the desolation in Tokyo, looking for primitive sounds, and his voice sounds like singing...

Koichiro Koizumi points out that an important facet of Ryu Murakami's work is the experimental destruction and denial of society, with hate and discrimination as its core energy. It is a literature of evil, rarely seen in Japanese literary tradition; a literature to deny the current situation with evil.

Haruki Murakami (b. 1949) won the Gunzou Prize for New Writers with *Kaze no Uta o Kike* (*Hear the Wind Sing*) in 1979, and the Noma Literary Prize for New Writers with *Hitsuji o Meguru Boken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*). He won the Tanizaki Jun-ichiro Prize with *Sekai no Owari to Hardboiled Wonderland* (*Hard-Boiled World and the End of the World*) in 1985. According to Yuko Kondo, H. Murakami depicts the 'nothingness' of humans trapped in this highly systemized world,

or the emptiness of society itself, with a dry writing style founded on translating works of American novelists F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Irving.

*Hitsuji o Meguru Boken* was translated and published in USA in October 1989; the *New York Times* Book Review had a substantial article on it with Murakami's photograph. Other major newspapers, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, and numerous magazines and literary journals featured articles, totalling over 20. The publisher, Kodansha International, claimed it was the first time that a modern Japanese novel was widely discussed in American literary and publishing circles. This work has been translated and published in UK, France, Germany, Italy, Republic of Korea, Netherlands, and Spain.

Banana Yoshimoto (b. 1964) won the 6th Kaiken Prize for New Writers for her short story *Kitchen* in 1987. With her short story collection of the same title, she won the 16th Izumi Kyoka Prize. Her other major works are *Utakata/Sanctuary*, *Tsugumi* and *Amrita*. Among all her translated works, the Italian version of *Kitchen* became a best seller, winning the Scanno Literary Prize in 1993. All of her works have the feeling of solitude and transparency, with the themes of loss and regeneration. Her novels have moved the hearts of the younger generation, creating an on-going "Banana Boom."

## For the Future

Literature does not change just because of the start of a new century. The economic depression is becoming more serious. The Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, fraud within the bureaucratic system, and underage crimes reveal society's maladies. When "words" seem so powerless—this is precisely the time that "words" are necessary. From among the confusion, some literary journalists have named works of a group of authors "J-Literature" (J for Japan): Ko Machida, Kazushige Abe, Seigo Suzuki, Mari Akasaka, Shu Fujisawa, Masaya Nakahara, and Toshihiko Miura. How their "J-language", a new style of Japanese language, creates a new world model—the experiment has just begun.

(translated by Kaori Ueki)

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Born in 1939 in Seoul. Haiku poet and editor. His books include collections of haiku such as *Natsuenu Tobira* (*Door to Summer*) and *Fuyu no Chie* (*Winter Wisdom*), collection of criticisms. As editor, his main works include *Shiba Ryotaro no Seiki* (*The Century of Ryotaro Shiba*) and *Dazai Osamu, Sakaguchi Ango no Sekai* (*The World of Osamu Dazai and Ango Sakaguchi*).

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