

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 208 (2015) 91 – 95

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

3rd International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture (ICLLIC 2014)

The Waves of Words: Literature of 3/11 in and around Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale of the Time Being*

Masami Usui

Doshisha University, Karasuma-Higashiiru, Kamigyo, Kyoto, Kyoto, 602-8580, Japan

Abstract

Literature has often been turned to during global chaos of world wars, terrorism, and unprecedented natural disasters due to rapidly advancing technology. As Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 created Atomic Bomb literature, 9/11 in New York created 9/11 literature. Named 3/11 after 9/11, the giant earthquake and tsunami that hit North-East Japan on 11 March 2011 founded the 3/11 literature. This group of Japanese writers could not help writing, directly or indirectly, on 3/11, initiating the foundation of a 3/11 literature. It was Ruth Ozeki on the other side of the ocean gave the voice to 3/11, by completing her novel. In and around Ozeki's *The Tale of the Time Being* (2013), therefore, there is a shared consciousness of making waves in the form of literature.

3/11 literature is more complicated than Atomic Bomb literature or 9/11 literature. Atomic Bombs and 9/11 are also interrelated as far as both of them represent monstrous wars which left even the unwounded with scars in this modernized and globalized world. Atomic Bombs and 3/11 are furthermore connected because 3/11 resulted in the crisis of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. 3/11 brings to us not only the reality of the visible physical destruction and disaster, but also the invisible nuclear pollution and influence on our lives, intensifying the inquiry into the reason for and the meaning of existence and life. Ultimately, contemporary writers are making waves of words, and those words are echoing in and around Ozeki's *A Tale of the Time Being*, which examines the interwoven psychological conflicts issued by 3/11 spreading across the ocean and over the generations.

Keywords: Asian American literature, comparative literature, literature of catastrophe

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of The English Language Studies Section School of Humanities Universiti Sains Malaysia

I. Introduction

The Great Earthquake and Tsunami in East North Japan on March 11, 2011 with its following Fukushima Nuclear Meltdown became the global issue, not only as a natural disaster caused by the global warming and its related causes, but also as the aftermath of globalization on all levels. For the Japanese, 3/11, named after 9.11, is engraved as one of the most terrible traumatic experiences since World War II. Consequently, the literature of 3/11 was born and is currently growing all over Japan as well as across the Pacific Ocean. In “The Words,” Shintaro Tanikawa expresses its birth:

“Words grown old from overuse
 Come alive again with our pain
 Grow deep with our sadness
 As if backed by silence
 They grow toward new meanings” (Tanikawa, 2012)

As Tanikawa ultimately reaffirms the power of words after 3/11, the writers who once lost their words in the wake of the massive catastrophes have been gradually awakened to their mission. Many Japanese writers could not find their words to express the unbelievable crisis just after 3/11. Some of them had to keep writing something else, while others needed silence (Ekunim, 2012). The literature of catastrophe is grounded upon skepticism and criticism of the conventional meanings and narratives of literature. In post 3/11, therefore, literature has been sought, tested, yet not settled completely. Because 3/11 represents the multi-layered and enlarged issues originated from globalization, it is currently forming the waves of a literature.

II. The Global Catastrophe and Trauma

This globalized era is confronted with the rapidly transforming catastrophes on this planet, yet it is at the same time blessed with new possibilities. The twentieth-first century is witnessing the changing globalization in economics, military power, technology, environment, culture, and international affairs. Though most of consequences of globalization are more complicated political, economic, environmental, social, cultural, and religious catastrophes, some of them definitely bring to us the positive aspects. The gap between these negative and positive aspects of globalization has been expanded so that it makes the catastrophe more serious. In this borderless era due to globalization, furthermore, there are heated strifes on national territorials, racial conflicts, religious borders, and dangerous environmental conditions leading to natural mass disasters. All of these are categorized into the catastrophe of globalization in this century.

3/11 is primarily the natural disaster in climatic variation, yet followed by radiation leakage of Fukushima nuclear power station that evoked the antinuclear movement. Fukushima nuclear plant station accident contains the potential threat of postwar nuclear weapons and wars since the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because of the rapid technological development and the environmental devastation, 3/11 is shifted to a more man-made disaster than a natural disaster. Even though global warming caused by carbon dioxide threatens us, denuclearization became the international issue. Most significantly, 3/11 is not the temporal incident, yet the consequence of the prolonged thorny problems of this planet. 3/11 was transmitted to almost every part of the planet, embodying the on-going hazard of globalization, that cannot be prevented, as the fate of this globe..

Because of the globalized communication tools, the consequences of those globalized issues have been swiftly conveyed to us beyond national borders, simultaneously viewed like the movies. Due to the rapid development and spread of internet as a global communication tool, it is quite easy to access to the news and public opinions, and even transfer our own personal opinions, photos, and videos through Facebook, Twitter, and Vine, and as a result suffering virtually from trauma. Though it is easy, it is not safe to rely on the globalized communication network. E. Ann Kaplan points out that “so-called mediatized trauma is important” because most people in modern era “encounter trauma by media” (Kaplan, 2005). The danger of “mediatized trauma” affects the prolonged psychological instability and ultimately attributes to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The visual and super realistic impact from the TV screen is too strong to be abandoned, forgotten, and diseased. As far as news is mercilessly transmitted to everywhere almost simultaneously beyond geographical borders by internet nowadays,

more crucially, it can even easily break the barrier of consciousness, evaluation, and judgment. The personally-taken moving pictures and photos of the incredible disaster of 3/11 tsunami were transmitted, whether locally or globally, and whether individually or collectively, to the realm of the unknown.

The catastrophe that causes the psychological strife provides us with an opportunity to reconsider the meaning of life. In search for the meaning of life, the literature of catastrophe is grounded upon the discourse of being memorized and being unforgotten. Because it is based on a collective voice, the literature of catastrophe needs the time of learning and examining. Due to the complex outcomes of globalization, the literature of global catastrophe consists of multilayered experiences and narratives especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Over all, the passage of literature of global catastrophe for the Japanese started especially in World War I and reached one significant turning point in World War II. During those years, literature of wars, Holocaust, and Atomic bomb were born in the discourse of human physical and psychological catastrophes. As far as Fukushima is added to a list of place-names of catastrophes, and, therefore, a local catastrophe is transformed into a global one with the personal consciousness switched to the collective consciousness. This transformation influences the contemporary writers who are more or less associated with the catastrophes, so that they definitely seek for the identical narratives of traumas. Ironically, however, the trauma in this globalized world leaves a question of the sense of identity, especially political identity (Kaplan, 2005). The literature of catastrophe is, thus, a continuing phenomenon of recording, retrieving, and recreating the traumatic experiences either in a private or collective narrative, and examining the true meaning of identity in this global era.

III. The Birth of 3/11 Literature

In March 2012, one year after 3/11, Salon de Libre invited Japanese writers as special guests, with 22 Japanese writers including Oe Kenzaburo, Nobel prize winner, attending this fair. During this fair, Oe in his interview with the *Le Monde* confessed that his works in progress *In Late Style* [*Bannen Yoshiki Shu*] (2013) had been reconstructed to reset the narrator in post 3/11 ruined Japan; he decided that his “interior journey coincides with the catastrophe that Japan is now living” (Warnock, 2012). As represented by his early work, *Hiroshima Notes* (1965), Oe has been an activist of anti-nuclear weapons, and, as for the crises of Fukushima’s nuclear plants, he is convinced that 3/11 is “Japan’s largest nuclear event since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (idem). At “Ecrire après la Catastrophe,” a symposium on March 17 during the 2012 Salon de Libre, younger Japanese writers exchanged their opinions and ideas of post 3/11 literature: why they were silenced, what to do with the former catastrophe, especially Atomic Bombings, what to write about and how to express it, what is the effect of writing it in Japanese, etc. (Ekumin, 2012). In 2012, a collection of stories and poems entitled *March was Made of Yarn: Reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Meltdown* was published both in Japanese and in English. 3/11 literature began to possess various enlarged themes in such literary works published in the same year, 2013: Watari Risa’s *Daichi no Geimu* (2013), Tsushima Yuko’s *Yamanako Dome* (2013), Murakami Haruki’s *Colorless Tukururu Tazaki* (2013), and Oe Kenzaburo’s *In Late Style* (2013) to name a few. The mission of writing about 3/11 finally crossed over the Ocean as a new challenge by Japanese American filmmaker, writer, and Zen priest Ruth Ozeki in her third novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013).

IV. Literature of 3/11

The circumstances caused by the catastrophe of life reveal the sense of isolation and alienation as shown in Haruki Mirakami’s *Colorless Tukururu Tazaki*. This catastrophe is originated by one lie and it binds the protagonist’s psychology. The sudden outcast by his four intimate friends of high school days makes Tukururu Tazaki deeply depressed and obsessed with death in his college days in Tokyo. His depression is gradually resolved, and his recovery is assured when Tukururu knows the reason why he was outcast. One of his friends, Shiro, tells a lie to the others that she was raped by Tukururu. Her prolonged mental disorder and unstable life ultimately leads to a tragedy when she was murdered in an unfamiliar town. The myth of a rape is created when the other friends had to cut off Tukururu in order to protect Shiro. The revival of Tukururu’s self-esteem is accompanied with his reconciliation with Shiro’s lie after her death:

Shiro’s nerves might not have been able to stand the pressure of what had to come, the trauma of the inevitable end of this tight-knit group of friends. She may have felt she had to unravel the

emotional bonds of the group herself or else be caught up, fatally, in its collapse, like a castaway sucked down into the abyss by the whirlpool of a sinking ship. (Murakami, 2013)

The already-established human relationship is not eternal, yet has to be broken for the future when individuals need to seek for their own paths, find the space of their own, and live by their own will and energy.

In contrast to Murakami's subtle implications of the catastrophe of life, Oe's direct connotations of 3/11 in *In Late Style* play the leading part in the narrative of conflicting souls, represented by "Catastrophe Committee" project. As its title suggests, *In Late Style* is considered the last of a series of novels in which Oe employs his unique "I" novel style with a protagonist, Choko Kobito, and his mentally retarded son, Akari. In his former works such as *Torikae ko* [*The Catching*](2000) and *Suishi* [*Death by Drowning*] (2009), the male conflict is symbolized by a suicidal death of human psychology in the wartime and postwar society. In *In Late Style*, the catastrophe of the earthquake and nuclear power stations reflect the conflicting relationship between the aging novelist and his son and also "three women," his sister, his wife, and his daughter. *In Last Style* is a project of compiled pieces, whether conflicting or co-existing.

The narrators' psychology is quaked by memoirs, music, poems, translations, interviews, meetings of anti-nuclear plant activism, and medical examinations. The layered narratives connotes the repeatedly crushing waves of lives from the wartime evacuation, school days, a pile of new philosophy and literature in the post war period, transforming social conditions, and emerging private conflicts. As the last wave, 3/11 becomes the outbreak of the catastrophe of the public and private lives. The family myth is broken, the concealed emotions are revealed, and his established style of novels is questioned when the novelist is turning 80 and finishing his last work. Those waves are interconnected with one another in the large scale of catastrophe of lives. The novel outlines the structure built up by the evidences of surviving during the chaotic time and being involved in the catastrophe.

As the 2013 Man Booker-shortlisted novel, *A Tale for the Time Being* challenges the narrative style in which the author is included as the character who gradually encodes the stories, revealing the hidden aspect behind those stories. As a Japanese American, Ozeki enlarges the possibilities for her contemporaries, by launching into the world where people are connected beyond the different places and times where they can reach the true meaning of life.

In her former two novels *My Year of Meat* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), Ozeki dealt with such controversial issues as the meat industry and the genetic modification of potatoes respectively. Both of these food industries influence and eventually determine the environment and human health on a global scale. In her narrative, Ozeki connects those issues with global communication, transnational identity, and gender issues. In the twentieth-first century, Ozeki "demonstrates the importance of considering our interdependence in social life and imagining beyond the celebratory liberal ideologies of multiculturalism and feminism" (Cheng, 2009). Arguing for female fertility against male violence with an ecofeminist or cosmofeminist perspective, for example, *My Year of Meat* "exposes the collusion between global television and corporate agribusiness in the transnational spaces across the Pacific Ocean" (Black, 2004). These spaces are again employed in *All Over Creation* which explores the conflicts and resolution of activism against genetically-modified food and also against the female body. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki is likewise concerned about the cross-cultural and cross-social issues.¹

The 3/11 Great Earthquake and Tsunami connects a 6-year-old Nao and a middle-aged Ruth across the Pacific Ocean when Ruth finds a Kitty-chan's lunchbox, that has drifted to the island shore of British Columbia. Naoko is drifting as an outsider and suffering an entire isolation. She calls herself "a time being," and attempts to write a life of her great-grandmother and Zen nun, Jiko because "how words and stories are time beings" (Ozeki, 2013). Those stories include Jiko's life and her great uncle's death as a kamikaze pilot during World War II. Nao's narrative possesses a collective voice from the several-layered past. On the other hand, Ruth, a writer, attempts to google Nao, yet is finally devoted to read Nao's hand-written diaries in the lunchbox, coming to understand Nao's.

1. Ozeki's mother is a Japanese and her father is a Caucasian. Ozeki is herself concerned about her identity and calls herself "hyphenated identity," saying: "I'm half Japanese, half Caucasian-American ethnically or racially, but my citizenship is Canadian/American so it gets even more complicated" (Kosaka).

psychological conflicts, caused by her father's unemployment, poverty, her American-born nature and her bullying at Japanese school. Nao's stories are the waves from a different shore of the Ocean, but they reach Ruth's mind. The web of narratives is constructed upon several threads of letters, diaries, oral stories, etc. In addition, the concept of time is interwoven with the meaning of beings who survive in this transfiguring contemporary society.

V. Conclusion

The literature of catastrophe is the most motivating and challenging of this twentieth-first century. Globalization has caused multilayered problems that largely affect the destiny of this planet: economic disparity, political conflicts, military intervention, technological defects, environmental crises, and globally-transmitted infectious diseases. Distinguished from the past catastrophes such as World War I, World War II, and Vietnam War, the contemporary catastrophes possess most striking and traumatic experiences that repeatedly and unexpectedly occur throughout the year on this globe. Though they seem different traumatic events, 3/11 embodies these contemporary catastrophes. The physical and psychological damage and casualties are inevitable for contemporary citizens who are more or less identified as refugees or evacuees from those global crises.

Because of this shared consciousness and high level of awareness concerning the consequences of globalization, the literature of catastrophe plays a distinct role to present to us a never-ending journey to profound understanding and an insightful analysis of global issues that are ultimately related to human life and death.

Notes

This paper is an introductory part of my five-year (2014-18) project "A Passage to the Borderless Intellectual Property: In Search for Coexisting Discourse of Global Culture and Literature" (NO 26370301) with the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.

1. Ozeki's mother is ethnically Japanese and her father is Caucasian. Ozeki is herself concerned about her identity, and calling herself "hyphenated identity," saying: "I'm half Japanese, half Caucasian-American ethnically or racially, but my citizenship is Canadian/American so it gets even more complicated" (Kosaka)

References

- Black, S., (2004), *Fertile cosmofeminism: Ruth L. Ozeki and transnational reproduction*, (pp. 226-56), *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 5 (1).
- Cheng, E., (2009), *Meat and the millennium: transnational politics of race and gender in Ruth Ozeki's my year of meats*, (pp. 191-220), *JJAS* (June).
- Ekunim, K., Hirano, K., Horie, T., and Watari, R., (2012), *Ecrie après la catastrophe*, (pp. 212-26), *Bungakukai*.66 (June).
- Kaplan, E. A., (2005), *Trauma culture: the politics of terror and loss in media and literature*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.
- Murakami, H., 2013, *Colorless tsukuru tazaki*, trans. Gabriel, P., New York, Random House.
- Ozeki, R., (2013), *A tale for the time being*, New York, Viking.
- Tanikawa, S., (2012), *Words*, in E. Luke and D. Karashima, *March was made of yarn: reflections on the Japanese Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown*, (n. pag), trans. J. Angles, et al, New York, Vintage.
- Warnock, E., (2012), *Oe in Paris: A Laureate Reflects on March 11*, *Japan Real Time*, 21 (March).