

HYBRIDITY AND CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE-LANGUAGE LITERATURE*

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Departing from atrocious “race theory” in which the word “hybrid” originates, hybridity today is redefined as a largely *de-raced* concept. The idea of cultural hybridity has become a serious challenge to the common assumption of regional autonomy of culture. Homi Bhabha has transformed Bakhtin’s formalist theory into a cultural project by drawing on psychoanalytical terms (Bhabha 1994; see also Young 1995). Postmodern literary theory and postcolonialism are thus combined; and in this light, a typical stylistic experiment by the writers of multicultural backgrounds (i.e., “hybrid writing”) has been re-valued as a strategy of resistance not only to literary canons but also to Euro-American cultural hegemony. Ironically, the strategy often revives a form of essentialism that obliterates the distinction between culture and nature, whereas the distinction is the major presupposition of modern cultural theory.

This paper aims to investigate how the “hybridity discourse” of our time, uniting postmodernism and cultural politics, faces the dilemma of cultural essentialism. Since the late nineties hybridity has become a global discourse and has affected contemporary Japanese-language writers. Together with Levy Hideo and Tawada Yoko, Mizumura Minae is often considered a representative writer of the era of multiculturalism; her “bilingual” novel, *Shishosetsu: from left to right* (1995) may become one of the best-known examples of hybrid writing in Japanese literary history. In the main discussion, I will analyze *Shishosetsu* as a case study and will examine the language-philosophy underlying the novel’s stylistic experiment.

Hybridity Reconsidered

Robert Young’s reformulation of hybridity (1995) has been criticized for suggesting the continuity between nineteenth-century and contemporary hybridity (Hall 1996). In fact Young presents a most insightful critique of hybridity discourse circulating among cultural critics today, as he problematizes the culture/nature dichotomy that gives the foundation of contemporary cultural theory. Historically, hybridity owes its development to nineteenth-century biologism in which the idea of “race,” supposedly based on biological nature, was interlocked with that of culture. Matthew Arnold defined English culture as a hybrid having developed dialectically through the conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism, whereas his

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argument was forcefully supported by Victorian ethnography which held that the English were racially-mixed people. Cultural anthropology since Franz Boas has been founded on the assumption of a clear-cut distinction between culture and race; however, according to Young, hybridity today may not so easily escape the colonialist legacies of racial determinism and essentialism, even if contemporary critics share the view that all cultures are intrinsically hybrid and that there is no such thing as cultural purity. Practically, contemporary hybridity discourse has not entirely given up the presupposition that there exist original cultures before mixing and hybridization, and the ideas of culture, nation, and possibly “race,” are still so often considered one and the same. Having said this, I do not mean to denounce postcolonial hybridity as being guilty of racialist thinking. Rather, as Young suggests, postcolonial theory can be subversive only in the efforts made to historicize its own perspectives: “[Culture] has always been comparative, and racism has always been an integral part of it: the two are inextricably clustered together, feeding off and generating each other” — and thence, “Race has always been culturally constructed” and “Culture has always been racially constructed” (Young 1995: 54)

The concept of hybridity cuts across the culture/race distinction on which cultural epistemology today is based. Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity is derived from Frantz Fanon’s bodily image of “black skin, white masks,” a forcefully visualized image that interprets the split in the colonial psyche as that between race (blackness-as-reality) and culture (whiteness-as-cover) (Bhabha 1986). Later Bhabha applies hybridity to his analysis of the psychic mechanism of colonial discourse, arguing that hybridity is now at the core of the working of colonial power, equal to the discriminatory practice of colonial discourse that produces cultural differences as its effect (Bhabha 1994). Although his theory of “hybrid discourse” draws on Bakhtian’s formalist concept of “novelistic discourse” (Bakhtin 1981 [1934-35]) Bhabha’s apparent predilection for biological and psychoanalytic terms, such as mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence, demonstrates how postcolonial theory has constructed itself by appropriating the body-nature metaphors that was once used to naturalize racist discourse. Likewise, literary works have also been utilizing this ambiguity of hybridity for their own strategic purposes. In the English-speaking world, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), probably the best-known text in the world that implements linguistic-cultural hybridity, has also explored “Darwinist” idioms circulating in the discourse of multicultural eighties. More recently, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) draws on the metaphor of genetic engineering to represent the anxiety of cultural identity felt acutely by ethnic minorities living in a globalized and hybridized society. The novel reveals the irony that genetic engineering, the most advanced technology of producing a hybrid body, is overshadowed by the decidedly racist ideology of eugenics whose ultimate aim is to create the “perfect” body.

Hybridity and Japanese-Language Literature

Contemporary Japanese-language literature can hardly escape the orbit of the globalized discourse on hybridity, and I would like to examine what particular version of hybridity discourse circulates through literary media in Japan. Despite the popular myth-making of the uniqueness of Japanese culture, Japanese-language literature has always been a multicultural composite. Considering post-WWII literary history alone, Korean residents in Japan have been

creating significant trends and movements in Japanese-language literature. Yet multiculturalism in literature has begun to be widely noticed and discussed only recently, especially since the debut of the two “Western” writers, Levy Hideo and David Zoppetti, in the early nineties. Another trend of hybrid writing is represented by Tawada Yoko and Mizumura Minae: the former writes both in Japanese and in German and is known for her experimental, literally hybridized style; the latter, having spent her adolescence and early adulthood in the US, wrote a novel in the so-called “bilingual” style. These writers have attracted media attention and have been hailed as the harbingers of the era of “world literature” (see Numano 2001). Behind such high praise seems to lie a deep-rooted belief in the indisputable difference, even incompatibility, between Japanese and Western culture. Speaking of hybridity in Japanese-language literature, both critics and writers tend to focus on Japan-West relations rather than consider every existent way of cultural mixture.

One common, important aspect of hybrid writing in Japanese is its frequent representation of “race” as visualized images, whereas the issue has been suppressed throughout modern Japanese literary history. Zoppetti’s popular first novel, *Ichigensan* (1997), tries to demonstrate how the visual difference plays an important part in intercultural communication. The protagonist-narrator, a European student specializing in Japanese literature in a university in Kyoto, volunteers for reading books for a blind girl, Kyoko, and eventually falls in love with her. He suffers the racializing gaze of the people in Kyoto, through which they immediately identify him as a *gaijin* (outsider). Being blind, Kyoko cannot see his foreignness; for her he exists only as a voice and later, a sexualized body still free of race. Zoppetti’s rather conventional style and narrative technique reveals a crude picture of the dilemma of hybridity that is firmly rooted in the idea of race, where race is above all considered a visible mark of difference between cultures. Similar, albeit less explicit, references to “race” recur in Levy’s and even Tawada’s texts.¹

And yet, Japanese hybrid writing, like the English equivalent, is more often considered (or masked) as a purely stylistic experiment. For example Levy, despite his traditionalist posture, is deeply concerned with stylistic representations of linguistic/cultural differences. As a scholar and translator of ancient Japanese literature, and as a writer who has made a deliberate choice to write in Japanese, he often emphasizes that he is fascinated with the Japanese language because it is far more heterogeneous and “rich” a language than cultural purists wish to believe. Levy suggests that the apparently complicated script, composed of two phonetic alphabets and Chinese characters, is proof of different cultures coexisting in the supposedly monocultural language. His first novel, *Seijoki no kiko enai heya* (*A Room Where the Stars and Stripes Cannot Be Heard*, 1992) features the pseudo-autobiographical story of Ben, the seventeen-year old protagonist who visits his father at the US consulate in Yokohama

¹ “Persona” (1992), one of Tawada’s early, formally less experimental stories written in Japanese, demonstrates how a human face, reputedly the most individual part of one’s body, is inevitably recognized as an essence of “race.” In Hamburg where the story takes place, the smooth, expressionless face of a Korean man is interpreted as an East-Asian “Confucian” face which suppresses his sexual perversity. And yet, the story contends that such racialized faces are also artificial and arbitrary masks. The protagonist, a Japanese young woman called Michiko, is taken for a Vietnamese when she does not wear make-up; and indeed, she puts on her make-up deliberately “to become a Japanese face” (Tawada 1998: 44). At the end of the story Michiko walks around in the downtown of Hamburg wearing a “fake” Japanese Noh-mask (it is considered “fake” because it has been bought from a souvenir shop in Spain).

in the sixties, and is gradually initiated into the world of the Japanese language. This language theme is intermingled with the theme of Japanese exclusivism; Ben's "pale-white face" is reminded repeatedly as a visible sign of his otherness for those who believe themselves to be the legitimate owners of the language.²

Tawada and Mizumura are more obviously experimental in style. The former, apparently the least burdened with the conventional ideas of national culture among the four authors mentioned above, is known for her uniquely creolized language which synthesizes different cultural and linguistic elements. In some of her major fictions written in Japanese, such as *Inumukoiri* (1993) and *Hikon* (1998) she combines legendary images and mock-folklores with her postmodern narrative mode and with the background of frivolous commercialism; this curiously anachronistic atmosphere is an effective representation of the hybridized cultural experience of contemporary Japanese life. Also, she frequently practises word-plays, through which she dissects words into phonemes and then re-arranges them with newly discovered meanings — sometimes the meanings are found in different languages. She argues that the act of writing in a language which is not one's mother tongue is a fruitful artistic experience. As a German-language writer she deliberately avoids "daily-used German that sounds natural," believing that "today a human being is a locus where plural languages coexist and transform each other, and there is no point in trying to deny the plurality and correct the distortion"; rather, "it may be more meaningful for literary creativity to pursue the consequences of our local accents" (Tawada 2003: 78; my translation).

Equally labelled as postmodernist, Mizumura's linguistic experimentalism, or so-called "bilingualism," displays a worldview distinguishable from that of Tawada's monolingual multilingualism (although the two writers still participate in the same discursive sphere — in this case more precisely, the same "structure of feeling" in Raymond Williams's terminology — where their writings are necessarily involved in cultural politics through which the very boundaries of languages are constructed). Contrary to the archaism of *Zoku meian* (a sequel to Natsume Soseki's unfinished *Meian*) her second novel, *Shishosetsu from left to right* (1995) is a "bilingual" novel which has been received as a postmodern experiment despite its autobiographical façade. Yet *Shishosetsu* is not only experimental but also highly "theoretical" (the novel was initially serialized in the intellectual journal, *Hihyo kukan*); it is a novel which self-consciously creates a bilingual novel, or a novel which tries to formulate what it is to be a bilingual novel. The following section will examine *Shishosetsu* in details and will investigate how the novel's language-philosophy deliberately relates stylistic issues to political struggles.

² *Seijoki no kiko enai heya* contains words such as *Shinjuku*, transcribed in *hiragana* (one of the two phonetic alphabets) and not in the customary Chinese characters. Those estranged words themselves are signs revealing that, even though he speaks Japanese, he still views the world differently from the native speakers of Japanese. Ben's Japanese also finds its analogy in the figure of a transvestite in Shinjuku (a famous pleasure-seeking area in Tokyo). Wearing a satin dress and heavy make-up, she speaks to Ben in Japanese, the harsh voice inevitably revealing her "real" sex — "It's cold, isn't it" — to which he replies in most idiomatic Japanese (Levy 1992: 137): "the man, acting a woman, found out who Ben was, and at the same time allowed him to be what he acted" (138).

Bilingualism and Untranslatability: Shishosetsu from left to right

Shishosetsu opens with a date entered by the first-person narrator in her diary — “Friday, December 13, 19XX.” It is set on this single day, which is the twentieth anniversary of “the Exodus” of the first-person narrator, Minae, and her older sister, Nanae. The sisters spend several hours talking to each other over the telephone; on the same day, Minae, a PhD student in French literature at an Ivy League university, decides to return to Japan after taking the oral examinations she has postponed several times. The day is also filled with Minae’s reflections on her life story, and the story seems crudely autobiographical as the Japanese-half of the title (*shishosetsu*) indicates (the title implies a genre of fiction which is often translated as “I-novel”; the I-novel is an autobiographical fiction in which the first-person narrator, nearly identical to the author, is expected to tell of his/her story with utmost sincerity and without omitting any minor and insignificant details).³

Although the Japanese title suggests that the novel conforms to a “traditional” genre of Japanese fiction, it is also manifestly experimental from the outset. Unlike most literary texts in Japanese which are traditionally written from top to bottom, it is written “from left to right” — hence the second half of the title. The opening passage is nearly all in English as Minae writes the diary in English. The English text of the diary gives an official version of the story, the record to be kept in the computer (although this may be given a realistic explanation: Minae may not have a Japanese word processor since it was not so easily available in the US in the eighties; the diary text is inserted several times throughout the novel). The diary is followed by the main text, a more personal and sincere account of the story, written primarily in Japanese with the occasional splattering of untranslated English words and phrases which come up “naturally” in the narrator’s mind. English is frequently used in the lengthy telephone conversations between the sisters; Nanae, who seems to be an Americanized mirror-image of Minae, mixes more English in her speech, whereas Minae obstinately clings to her Japanese identity.

Minae’s life story is made to present an account of the cultural struggle underlying the novel’s linguistic avant-gardism. Throughout her expatriate life Minae longs to return to Japan. This is articulated in the opening passages as her desire to return to the place of her matrilineal ancestry, of *yamanba* (i.e., a legendary female outcaste): “the horrifying blood of women from the nation of the rising sun, having flown continuously for hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of years” (8; my translation).⁴ Nostalgically she idealizes Japan, whereas

³ The I-novel is often considered a “traditional” mode of Japanese fiction although its origin could be in nineteenth-century European literature (the *Ich-Roman* and naturalism). Arguably, the I-novel tradition dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century (namely, the works of Tayama Katai) and saw its prime and perfection in the postwar works of Shiga Naoya (1883-1971). Contemporary “multicultural” writers, such as Yu Miri and Levy Hideo, self-consciously adopt the I-novel mode of writing.

⁴ Iida Yoko argues that the reference to *yamanba*, significantly repeated at the ending of the novel, indicates Minae’s declaration of becoming a woman writer; according to Iida *yamanba* is a common way of representing women writers, who are considered to transgress preestablished gender roles (Iida 2004: 249). Gender is certainly an undercurrent issue in the novel. Being brought up as “young ladies” (*ojosan*) of the Japanese middle-class background in multicultural society (where their existence is inevitably racialized), the sisters are caught in a double-bind: they cannot hope for traditional middle-class marriage, but they cannot easily cope with the idea that they need to earn their living, either. And yet, the politics of bilingualism tends to reduce multiple differences, including gender difference, into the binary opposition between languages (alias cultures).

she is always aware that the Japan she dreams for does not exist in reality but does so only in her favourite works of modern Japanese literature (as a matter of fact, being afraid of confronting the “ugly” reality of Japan, she keeps on postponing her return). And thus Minae resorts to the illusory world of archaic, literary Japanese:

I did not lose my “Japanese” self and, so far as I used the Japanese language, that self continued to exist; I thought that the “I” in the Japanese language was what I was truly, and continued to live with the belief that I could easily retrieve it once I went back to Japan, because the “I” in the English language was something which hardly seems to me what I am. (163)

Resistance to the self-image represented in the world of English leads her to the wish to become a Japanese writer — the wish she declares several times on that day, when she decides to take the orals and leave America for Japan.

Yet the “tradition” of Japanese literature, to which Minae wishes to return, is never portrayed as a monocultural utopia. The novel gives a serious critique of the way Japanese literature has been dealing with, or rather willingly suppressing, cultural differences which are inevitably inscribed within its “tradition.” Upon Minae’s decision to become a Japanese writer, the sisters discuss over the telephone what kind of novel is marketable in Japan. Minae criticizes the trend of Japanese popular fiction in which “America” and the English language are featured solely as fashionable backgrounds:

What a silly novel; a novel that fuses the worlds of English and Japanese without a trace of split or seam, in that Japanese script meandering from top to bottom, written in *kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana* splattered here and there — in which a Japanese man appears as if he could exist as an individual in America, regardless of the reality of America that the man is always a Japanese and Asian and yellow race before ever becoming a man — how could one write such a silly novel? (143).

More importantly, the same naïvité is observed in apparently more serious literary works. Minae recalls a seminar presentation given by a graduate student on Akutagawa’s “Butokai,” a short story inspired by Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*. According to the student, the story exemplifies “an exercise in style,” which is “a tradition of making free use of the existent Japanese language and trying to represent the Western world in that language — the tradition of making use of the elegance of the pseudo-classical style” (277). However, the professor points out “the wishful thinking on the part of Akutagawa” (278); in his version, the French Naval Officer admires the Japanese heroine and tells her that “dance parties are the same everywhere,” whereas Loti, the officer’s model, openly ridiculed the Japanese. Later, when Minae tells the same professor that she will go to Japan after the orals, she declares that she wants to write novels “like Soseki” (this seems as if referring to Mizumura’s own first novel, *Zoku meian*). The professor gives her a word of advice: “try not to mix up your Japanese with English” (324).

Thus the novel asserts that “an exercise in style” is never a purely esthetical act but a way in which the text presents its own world view — which may be called a “selective ignorance” as one of the students in the above-mentioned seminar puts it (278) — through which the text wishes to see the world. Also, in this Bakhtinian opinion on stylistics, the choice of language expresses a certain world view. Choosing to write in Japanese, the narrator Minae is well aware

of its consequence vis-à-vis the hegemony of the English language:

Languages are not like the flags of nations decorating the façade of the UN offices; it is not like “there is English, and there is Japanese.” Just as the sight of lined-up flags conceals the power relations between the nations, the idea that all languages exist equally conceals the power relations between the languages. No matter how similar Sarah’s and my literary tastes may seem, we can’t be writers of equal power so far as one writes in English and the other in Japanese. Written in English, one’s work will be translated into all languages in the world; even without translation, it will be read by people all over the world. (315)

It is this global readability and translatability of English which Minae needs to challenge by choosing to write in Japanese “like Soseki.”

Yet the “bilingual” novel, the novel written against the professor’s advice not to “mix up your Japanese with English,” may engage itself in another kind of strategy of subversion. In her essay on “Authoring *Shishosetsu*,” the author herself declares that the novel cannot be translated into English without losing its bilingual effect: “it would be possible to translate *Shishosetsu* from left to right into any other language in the world, be it Korean, Polish or Arabic, and still replicate its bilingual form by leaving the English sentences intact. The only language into which it would be impossible to translate the work would be English” (5). In this light, bilingualism by itself becomes a means of resistance to English hegemony. On the other hand, the bilingual form is also a radical critique of the “traditional” exercise in style through which Japanese writers have been trying to fuse different languages in a single language. For the majority of Japanese readers (who are clearly the target audience of the novel — at least in marketing terms) the untranslated English sentences are obstacles to full understanding. Thus *Shishosetsu* emphasizes the discordance and untranslatability, rather than the fusion or union, between English and Japanese. Being self-consciously “bilingual,” the novel fortifies the boundary of languages.⁵ However, it should be noted that there are certainly other languages repressed in this reductive representation of binarism, such as French, the language chosen by Minae for her academic career (she chooses to study French as if to escape the conflict between Japanese and English; French indicates the novel’s hidden dream for a utopian third language, neutral, sophisticated and unconditionally desirable). Reading carefully, we may also notice that the Japanese language used in the text consists of a hybridized discourse with layers of different styles and idioms, as if to reproduce textually the difference between real and literary Japan.

Bilingualism (as understood as reductive binarism) is particularly foregrounded by the mixture of Japanese script and Roman alphabet, and this textually-visualized hybridity enhances the effect of untranslatability. The visual difference of the two languages is an important subject-matter of the novel. The narrator Minae remembers that in the school classroom, she used to write Japanese script on her notebooks, admiring the elegant shape of each letter:

⁵ In the aforementioned essay Mizumura contends that “The language of *Nihon kindai bungaku* [modern Japanese literature], born initially out of an effort to come up with translations of Western literature, is a language that sought the translatability of language in the language,” and “no writer today seems to find it necessary to actually seek the translatability of language” because “The translatability of the Japanese language is already assumed as a fact” (“Authoring *Shishosetsu*” 6).

How beautiful “shi” in *hiragana* was. *Hiragana* was never angular — beautiful, gentle, rounded, as if a beautiful woman was stretching or bending herself, doing some housework. I drew a vertically elongated “shi” as if I was an avant-garde calligrapher. *Kanji*, combined with *hiragana*, towers above and reveals its essence as an ideogram. In my eyes *kanji* and *hiragana* flowing majestically from top to bottom invoked a world totally different from the world of alphabet, where ant-like letters were tightly arranged in horizontal lines. (287; “alphabet” is spelt in Roman alphabet in the original)

This difference of the Japanese script, deliberately visualized by aid of gendered and somewhat sexualized bodily images, becomes the source of her cultural pride: “by writing *kanji* and *hiragana* I was able to transform myself from a miserable existence of the intellectually-handicapped inferior race into someone who inherits a different culture, a glorious existence, one who is acquainted with a world that is irreplaceable by any other world” (287). When she learns that “the evidence of being Japanese does not consist in one’s blood,” she turns to the language and becomes emotionally attached to it (374).

Ironically, the idea of visual difference, which fills Minae with a certain amount of pride in her cultural identity, is closely linked to an undercurrent theme of the novel — the problematic interrelation between culture, nation, and “race” in multicultural society. The novel is not devoid of allusions to the historical context in which Minae’s family was sent to the US as a harbinger of Japan’s economic growth, but it emphasizes how the idea of class can be overshadowed by “race,” and the visibility of difference can play a more important part in determining one’s place in the social ladder: “In this country, people are placed in hierarchy in the crude, rough, but complicated way, by what is marked on them permanently despite their will” and “the mark on one’s body is the most important of all” (251).⁶ Being conscious of their cultural/national identity and upper-middle-class background, Minae and Nanae are puzzled (and snobbishly infuriated) by the fact that they are repeatedly put into the same category as Koreans and Chinese, moreover, into the category of the “colored” together with black Americans; the visible body, the “color,” is now the ultimate evidence of difference. Minae does not fail to realize that the “color” is indeed an idea, a concept constructed socially and linguistically: “Saying that Japanese are ‘colored’ in the same way as blacks is more or less like saying that women and the moon belong to the same Yin world”; “it is simply a concept that functions, since the Westerners, who consider themselves the subject [*shutai*] of the Western languages, have decided to call themselves white, and to call all others who look different colored” (223; “colored” and “white” are written in English and spelt in Roman alphabet in the original). And yet, Minae has lived in the English-speaking world long enough to have the logic of the language internalized, so that in her mind the world of concepts created by English is nearly indistinguishable from the material world. She perceives and articulates the world as (white) English speakers do: seeing her sister standing among the crowds of Manhattan, Minae cannot help thinking that “what I saw there was an Oriental woman who

⁶ “Race” is also an important motif in *Honkaku Shosetsu*, although the primary setting of the novel is post-war Tokyo. The central character, Taro, is an orphan modelled after Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), whose love for the daughter of an upper-class family is rejected due to their class-difference. Taro’s being an underclass outcaste is linked with the suspicion that he may not be fully Japanese; during the Japanese occupation of Northern China, his mother was kidnapped by the locals and gave birth to him after the incident (it is repeatedly mentioned that his physical and facial features are not typically Japanese). Throughout the novel, the concepts of “race” and culture are intermingled and mutually dependant.

is no longer young enough" (224). Minae is indeed the subject of the language, one who views the world through its logic, whereas the very logic alienates her from becoming the subject: "Even if I wrote English as Virginia Woolf did, I would not be able to become a privileged young lady again" (176). As declared in the aforementioned passage on contemporary Japanese "international" novels, Minae cannot write outside the racializing discourse through which she represents herself as "a Japanese and Asian and yellow race." The visualizing of the difference between English and Japanese turns out to be a double-edged project: Minae emphasizes the materiality of language, insisting that language provides material evidence of difference; in doing so, she reaffirms and reinforces the idea of difference which she believes is created by language. This paradox, inherent in Minae's strategy of resistance, also suggests what is at issue in the novel's bilingualism.

Mizumura and the Untranslatable "I"

Needless to say, we cannot readily assume that Minae the narrator is equal to the author; narratologically, the narrator is never identical with the author even in an autobiography, and to a great extent Mizumura observes Minae in a detached, objective manner. *Shishosetsu* is deliberately written in an autobiographical mode which is considered to be "traditionally" Japanese, i.e., the mode of the I-novel; however, this should not be considered as the consequence of naïveté or lack of creative imagination on the part of the author (of which I-novel writers are often suspected). *Shishosetsu*'s autobiographical mode is a self-conscious replay of the "tradition" of modern Japanese literature, the tradition being by itself a hybrid product. "Being autobiographical" is an integral part of the novel's strategy; and it is mandatory to consider this metafictional twist in the representation of the "I" in order to grasp the full picture of Mizumura's scheme.

The lengthy authorial preface to Mizumura's third and latest novel, *Honkaku shosetsu* (2002) adds further complication to this matter, although it holds some clues to the paradox of her stylistic/cultural project. *Honkaku shosetsu*, a family saga modelled after *Wuthering Heights*, is outwardly less experimental; or rather, the novel is a deliberate reversal of *Shishosetsu*, designed to supplement the experiment of *Shishosetsu*. The title *honkaku shosetsu* can be translated as "real" or "authentic" novel, which refers to realistic fiction characterized by a well-conceived plot. The genre is considered typically "western" and antithetical to the I-novel, and this debate on I-novel versus authentic novel is by itself a "traditional" literary topic dating back to 1920s.⁷ The main part of the novel is based on the plot and the narrative structure of a nineteenth-century English novel, and largely conforms to the criteria of "the authentic novel." However, the preface, entitled "The Long, Long Story before *Honkaku shosetsu* Begins," is an autobiographical account relating the author's personal memories of the novel's central character. Like *Shishosetsu*, this preface is written in the I-novel mode, and the

⁷ The so-called "I-novel debate" was initiated by Makamura Murao's essay on "The Authentic Novel and the State-of-Mind Novel" ("Honkaku shosetsu to shinkyo shosetsu") published in *Shin Shosetsu* in 1924. For a concise summary of this debate, see Suzuki 1996: 49-52. Suzuki asserts that rather than an identifiable, fixed genre, *shishosetsu* is a discourse circulating in the literary lobbies: "the characteristics of the so-called I-novel texts were largely defined by and within this I-novel meta-narrative and then projected back on certain texts" (2). Mizumura herself translates the titles of her novels as "a personal novel" and "a real novel" ("Authoring *Shishosetsu*").

“I” approximates Minae in *Shishosetsu* in terms of personality and factual details.

The entire preface can be read as a metacommentary on the narrative scheme of *Shishosetsu* as well as that of *Honkaku shosetsu*. Nearly at the end of the preface, the narrator explains why she, as a Japanese writer, cannot write a thoroughly realistic novel. According to her, the reason is that in Japanese literature, only the stories of the “I” who corresponds to the physical presence of the writer can be considered truly “real”: “the I-novel is positively valued by its readers only when it appears as if devoid of the intention to totalize, or the intention to construct its own small universe which transcends the individual presence by the power of language” (*Honkaku shosetsu* 175). And the narrator speculates that this effect is due to the very structure of the Japanese language in which the concept of the “I” is articulated: “the ‘I’ in Japanese refers only to the physical presence of the ‘I’ [*gutaitekina watashi*] and it has never obtained the same meaning as the ‘I’ in English which may transcend the individual and become an abstract subject” (175; *gu-tai* literally means “to be endowed with a body”).⁸ At this stage, the logic of the I-novel discourse draws a curious trajectory through which hybridity returns to a certain form of essentialism (though we may call it “strategic essentialism”). The bodily “I” is a singular being that resists being translated into any other being. And yet, the body should ultimately be articulated in cultural terms, and thence becomes the distinctly Japanese “I.”

This final move is highly ambivalent and suspicious of cultural/national essentialism, although it gives a schematic outline of the “I-novel” project of Japanese literature. It could also be linked to Mizumura’s own experiment of bilingualism in *Shishosetsu*: the bilingual “I,” a means of resistance to linguistic imperialism, can be considered another form of the Japanese “I” translated from the material body. Most symbolically, *Shishosetsu* closes with the narrator’s reawakened desire to be a *yamanba*, a Japanese woman/writer whose bodily existence is virtually translated into a roaring sound of resistance: “the maddening desire for life travelled through my body; at this moment, the *yamanba*, with their hair unkempt, danced out of their tombs and ran down the mountains in their bare feet, the sound of their footsteps roaring in my ears” (389). What saves Mizumura’s text narrowly from the pitfall of national/racial chauvinism is its enhanced, “theoretical” self-consciousness — the text’s self-referential questioning of what Japanese literature is, along with the deliberate use of the “traditional” form of pseudo-autobiography, where it is the writerly “I” that is to be subverted and dismantled.

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⁸ In this argument Mizumura does not necessarily agree with academic critics of the I-novel. Edward Fowler, for example, has argued that the “I” in an I-novel is far more determined by his/her social relationships than the “I” in European literature, to the extent that it should rather be called the “we-novel” (Fowler 1988).

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