

Breaking Taboos in Asian Young Adult Fiction: The Cases of Japan and Thailand

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審査結果の要旨

Summary

This dissertation probes the curious absence of young adult fiction in Japan and Thailand and proposes two novels by authors caught between cultures as prototypes of Asian YA fiction. The dissertation presents theoretical ideas that link the Western obsession with youth with the rise of modernity, ideas taken from Franco Moretti's discussion of the *Bildungsroman*; Moretti marks this moment, and the appearance of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, as a turning point in European civilization for the significance of youth.

Before Wilhelm, Moretti points out; youth was merely a biological category indicating the stage of progression on an individual's progress towards taking over the family trade; after Wilhelm, youth became a symbol of the modernity that had transformed Europe, and the traditional march towards a pre-decided future became impossible. Nakagami employs these ideas as a background for looking into the differences in the subjectivity of the child in the West and in Asia, claiming that the modernity which transformed Europe and brought the idea of struggling youth to the fore has never really occurred in Japan or Thailand. The category of child, Nakagami points out in her examination of Thai children's literature critic Siriporn Sriwarakan's work, is an entity to be protected and kept distinct from the category of adult. On the other hand, as Sriwarakan points out, Western YA fiction blurs the

distinction and creates a new parent-child relation which is more characteristic of friends than the traditional guardian-teacher role.

Nakagami takes the hint from the Japanologist Norma Field in looking at Ian Hideo Levi's novel (written in Japanese and later translated into English) *Seijoki no Kikoenai Heya* (*The Room Where the Star-Spangled Banner Can't Be Heard*). Field celebrates this work not only as the first major work of Japanese fiction written by a non-Japanese, but also as an example of Moretti's youth-produced-by-modernity. Ben Isaac, Levi's protagonist, is the disenchanted son of the American consul in Yokohama. He revolts against his father's colonial attitude to and dislike of Japan, setting for himself the goal of mastering Japanese, which he sees as the key to entering the magic wonderland of Shinjuku. Nakagami chooses this work as a prototype of Japanese YA literature because it contains those elements she could not find in her four-year examination of works more traditionally labeled YA literature in Japan: disenchantment, rebellion, and the presence of an exteriority with no "safety net" of concerned adults ready to save the protagonist from his own folly.

A good part of the dissertation is devoted to listing and describing those Japanese "YA novels" which Nakagami finds to be lacking in those elements, particularly in the sense of exteriority. Too many works, even when they present a new image of what constitutes a family, contain the seemingly inevitable "safety net." This seems to be a hangover from the idea of the child who requires, more than anything else, the need for protection. In sharp contrast, Western YA literature, especially the "problem novels," presents teens who are generally on their own as they seek to find their way out of problems such as parents' divorce or abuse, drugs and sex. While Western teens can use YA literature as a resource for their own problems, such realistic fiction is not available in Japan, where a number of taboos still prevail in fiction for young people.

Nakagami documents the growing awareness on the part of CL and YA writers in Japan. She describes the special issue of the journal *Nihon Jidou Bungaku* (Japanese Children's Literature) which was devoted to the theme of "Overcoming the Taboos." Among the discussants who tried to imagine a way forward for CL and YA fiction in a Japan where divorce had hardly appeared were Yoshiko Akagi and Kenjirou Haitani children's literature authors. Nakagami points

to these authors' concerns that so few works had depicted divorce and that the nation's imagination in this area had been dominated by Miyoko Mitsutani's Chisai Momo-chan series. Hisako Ichimura complains that Mitsutani's treatment of divorce in this series prunes the pain and anxiety caused by divorce with a touch of the fantasy world. According to Nakagami, the work treats divorce as an event but omits the emotional impact on the child.

This discussion took place in 1978, but little changed in Japanese CL and YA literature after that. The taboos seem to have been harder to remove than the discussants imagined. It is partly for this reason that Nakagami looks to Ian Hideo Levi's tale of a disenchanting American youth in Japan as a prototype of Japanese YA fiction, declaring that only "people in the middle"—which is to say "people caught between cultures" are capable of forging stories in which struggling youth appear and fight their way to self-realization.

Anticipating the criticism that an American national's book cannot be considered Japanese YA literature even if written in Japanese, Nakagami asks the readers of her dissertation to consider the theory of interculturality developed by Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio, the 2008 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Nakagami connects ideas presented earlier in her dissertation on "stable" cultures (Moretti's idea of the pre-modern society) and "tragic" cultures (Richard Rodriguez's idea of traditional cultures like Mexico where change is not effected easily) with Le Clezio's warning that "cultural stability" is something promoted by governments in the name of a "pure" national literature. Nakagami valorizes Le Clezio's insistence that "Literature . . . isn't the expression of a territory, and if literature is reduced to such an expression it becomes inaudible and unacceptable."

The second novel Nakagami chooses as prototype of Asian YA fiction is Rattawut Lapcharoens' *Sightseeing*. The young Thai writer, like Levi and Norma Field herself, is between two cultures, and his fiction shows Thai life from a rare perspective, that of the lower middle class who serve "farang" or foreigners. Nakagami considers this work in comparison with other works of what might be considered Thai YA fiction: Kampon Boontawee's *A Child of the Northeast* and Jane Vejajiva's *he Happiness of Kati*. The former documents the childhood of a boy in the poverty stricken Northeast, the latter a few months in the life of an upper middle class girl in Bangkok. While the two novels represent extremes of Thai social

classes, Nakagami rejects them for the same reason she rejects many Japanese novels for young people: the protagonists are too protected to qualify as genuine YA protagonists.

Lapcharoens' fiction, on the other hand, demythologizes the representation of Thailand as a "beach paradise" for good-looking Westerners, the image created by *The Beach* with Leonardo DiCaprio. The young Thai writer mocks the vacuity of American masculinity in his portrayal of what life is like running beach concessions for young guys convinced that they are irresistible to young Thai women.

Nakagami claims that the two works she has chosen as prototypes of Asian YA fiction are directly linked to the experience of modernity in Asia. She sees the works as linked to modernity in their disenchantment with the East-West relations in their lives; they are the children of modernity, Nakagami insists, because they have emerged from the discontents of the US globalized imperialist reach; she claims them as her prototypes of YA fiction because she sees them as emerging into a world beyond concepts of national identity.

Evaluation:

The strongest point of Nakagami's dissertation is her ability to connect theory with the condition of CL and YA literature and her understanding of the difference in the subjectivity of the Asian child as opposed to the Western one. Her proposal to look at Levi's and Lapcharoens' fiction as prototypes of an emerging Asian YA fiction is stimulating. The committee suggested to her that her rejection of so much Japanese YA fiction as unsuitable for its "safety net" might need to be reconsidered as there are surely more examples that could be included in a new definition of the genre.

Nevertheless, the committee judged her work to be acceptable as a PhD dissertation, and that she should be awarded the degree.