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NOSTALGIA AS A MEANS TO OVERCOME TRAUMA: THE CASE OF YOSHIMOTO BANANA'S “SWEET HEREAFTER”

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Author, Style, Main Themes

The popular writer Yoshimoto Banana (nickname of Yoshimoto Mahoko, 吉本真秀子, Tōkyō, born in 1964) is considered to be a representative of the new generation of Japanese writers interested in depicting the modern age and its changes, rather than

taking into consideration the aesthetic value of their own literary works.

The writer, a passionate fan of manga, drama and pop music to which Yoshimoto pays frequently homage in her novels (Amitrano 2007), adopted the nickname “BANANA” in the late 1980s and immediately became well-known among teenagers all over the world: as a symbol of androgyny, this fruit also represents something consumable and short-lived as her literature. Actually, the critic Treat applied the term *tsukaisute* (使い捨て, Treat 1993) to Yoshimoto’s literary production as a label to describe the quality of disposable or “use and throw away,” totally anew literary work in a ever-changing era.

Yoshimoto, very prolific in her genre, has already published more than 40 novels until now and a considerable number of essays and *taidan*, a genre very popular in Japan which consists in crossover interview between authors or literary critics and journalists. Starting from her first novel *Kitchin* (「キッチン」, “Kitchen”), published in 1987, she rapidly gained success and got favourable comments from critics to such an extent as to talk about the *Banana Genshō* (ばなな現象, “BANANA phenomena”; Amitrano 2007 : 44).

The recurring themes in Yoshimoto’s works represent a cross section of modern Japanese society and the recent trend of changing the traditional family’s stereotype in new nonconformist models like the “extended family” in which blood ties are no more considered as a compulsory requirement. Young Japanese people are then introduced by Yoshimoto to gender matters such as homosexuality and transsexuality, incest and feelings of abandonment and isolation, all of which are typical factors of a social disintegration:

The protagonists of these novels are on the thresholds of a transformation to which one can give the name of “hope”: all of the sudden they realize that something brings back to life their feelings, almost forgotten, and also discover the urgency to spring into action as they have not ever done before. Their unease and distress to get to grips with their spiritual burdens and their relief after the liberation are some of the other themes. (Yoshimoto 2002: Afterwords)

The author explained in these terms the common denominator of her literary production, in the postface of a short-novel collection published in Italy under the title of *Lucertola* (2002). Yoshimoto always exhibits an interest in the possibility of recovery from trauma and in the healing process itself; hence the typical development of Yoshimoto’s novel: the protagonist at a certain moment (due to a traumatic event) rediscovered lost feelings (nostalgia) and felt the need to redeem oneself (thorough new gender model) until the complete recovery which consists in re-discovering one own true identity. Her writing style, defined as subtle and straightforward like a “baby talk, uninterrupted by humor, emotion, idea, not to say irony or intelligence,” (Treat

1993: 365) does not spare her readers from being involved in the violent and painful accidents that eventually shake protagonists's life. An everlasting message is transmitted with extreme efficacy: the protagonist's growth, possible only after a traumatic encounter, is encouraged by the research of one's identity; the first step is to reflect on the past, always perceived as nostalgic, and get familiar with trauma itself. This is not a simple and rapid process but a painful and hard path to cover instead; a demanding challenge, a major toll on the protagonist's emotional development but necessary in order to take over the reins of one life again.

Yoshimoto's Shōjo: Consumerism as a Symptom, Trauma as Diagnosis and Nostalgia as Therapy

The protagonist of Yoshimoto's writing is always a *shōjo* (少女), a young woman in her twenties, skinny and not very busty, strong-willed, sometimes aggressive; "kirei de wagamama"—"pretty but willfull," (Treat 1993: 367) the *shōjo* keeps her innocence unaltered, as well as the candour attributed to childhood. With no doubt *shōjo* is the emblem of the "aesthetic of cuteness" (Treat 1993: 367) associated to some attributes like *kawaisa* (可愛さ), the particular characteristic of being cute in both physical and psychological terms. Ann Sherif (1999) recognises as features of Yoshimoto's *shōjo* some "feminine values such as cuteness, innocence, naïveté, nostalgia, consumerism" (282–283).

Actually, the last attribute can be considered as a feature of contemporary society whose *shōjo* serves only as the umpteenth commercial product: "the role of the *shōjo* [is] to *symbolize* their consumption" (Treat 19993 : 362). The link between *shōjo* and consumerism can be found in the traumatic experience of been commercialised: women used by men as exchangeable objects or as units of currency (Murakami 2005) for sexual trade ever since are the protagonists of warped love affairs, cases of incest, transsexuality and homosexuality themes, very frequent in Yoshimoto's novels. They represent a particular trauma, the one of the corrupted body of the society as a whole. The consumeristic approach to *shōjo* is actually underlined by a male counterpart deprived of his masculinity or any other distinctive stereotypical male features. The binomial *shōjo*-consumism is then just the tip of the iceberg that covered the trauma of the (social/individual) identity crisis: "Banana exhibits an interest in troubled people (*komatta hito*), individuals whose lives have been nearly devastated by acts of random violence, loss, illness, and troubled family" (Sherif 1999 : 278–279).

The background in which Yoshimoto's story set up is a domestic environment of everyday life shocked by a traumatic event of misfortune, abandonment, isolation. The daily routine is

considered by the protagonists as boring and tiresome in itself: the frenetic rhythm of the great metropolis that does not allow to take even a breath to focus on private matters, is filled with a feeling of *nanimo nasa* (何もなさ), a loss of stimulus and interests towards life and a sentiment of indolence felt by Yoshimoto's protagonists. The consideration that the routine is empty and vacue leads to a particular condition summarised by Treat (1993) in "the desire for desire" (376–377): the lack of faith in the future, often connected to a loss of hope in the possibility of a social change and the quest for happiness at present time, provokes a self-destructive rage spiral. Hence the impulse to review the past, via nostalgia. Susan Stewart recognises a indissoluble link between desire and nostalgic feeling for something lost in terms that "the point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire" (Treat 1993 : 376–377).

One of the main feature of the *shōjo* came out: the nostalgia. This feeling of *natsukashisa* (懐かしさ) reveals itself in Yoshimoto's novels in different ways: thorough a faraway house, a lost person, a feeling perceived and then missed; dreams, hallucinations, images and paintings: everything is transformed by Yoshimoto in a vehicle to allow the reader to sympathize with the protagonists and share the same nostalgic feeling; it can be seen as an exhortation to her young readers to keep on seeking the lost self in the past in order to not betray one's identity. The *natsukashisa* is so common in Yoshimoto's novels that the critic KamataKōjiconsidere it as a keyword:

The word 'natsukashii' evokes in many Japanese native speakers a deep emotional response. (...) 'natsukashii' derives from the verb 'natsuku' which means to get use to be with or to become attached to something/someone. Thus, in its original meaning, a 'natsukashii' person was someone with whom one felt comfortable. (Murakami 2005: 77)

But happiness resides in the past: brief moment of joy which are un-reproducible, sometimes idealized whose nostalgic value increases bit by bit as time goes by. Murakami (2005) Fuminobu pointed out that Yoshimoto's protagonists need that feeling of nostalgia: "what is desired is not the rebirth itself, but the sense of nostalgia" (77). This feeling of *natsukashisa* can be seen as the solution the protagonists find to fill up the emptiness and solitude of everyday life by the recalling of memories and flesh-backs.

Treat (1993) also proposed a new paradigm of reflection about the role of nostalgia in Yoshimoto's novels when he stated that "[t]he nostalgic relationship of Banana's characters to their everyday lives is replicated in the relationship that each Banana book constructs between the text and its audience" (380). Her literature, considered as perishable as her nickname, becomes an

addiction to which her loyal readers cannot be apart. When a story ends, a nostalgic taste left in mouth puts pressure to look for the same flavour in the next Yoshimoto's novel.

The Daishinasai and Suiito Hiiiaafutaa

This is the literary background in which the novel *Suiito hiaafutaa* (「スウィート・ヒアアフター」) ("Sweet hereafter," 2011) is set. Even though the novelist admitted that the *Daishinsai* (the *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai* 東日本大震災 or simply *Daishinsai* 大震災) does not stand for the genesis of the story, already setup before 11th March, it is in the *atogaki* (後書き), a postface usually addressed directly to her public, where Yoshimoto explained how this event influenced drastically her writing:

The earthquake occurred on 11th March 2011 has changed considerably not only the life of people who are living in the stricken areas but also my life, in Tōkyō. I think it is really hard to understand but I wrote this novel addressing it to the people who experienced this *Daishinsai*, dead or alive. (Yoshimoto 2011: Afterwords)

There are no factual and clear reference to the *Daishinsai* that may help the reader to pinpoint a possible connection between the story of the protagonists in *Suiito hiaafutaa* and the three-fold tragedy that shocked Japan on 11th March 2011. Although, at a first glance, this choice can be interpreted as a form of *omertà*, the allusions are suggested by Yoshimoto under the lines thorough the technical and stylistic aid of rhetoric figures such as analogies and metaphors. In an interview the author released to me in 2013, she confessed that this particular choice finds explanations in the fact that she wrote the novel "to make it read by dead people" (De Pieri 2014: 207–210). Metaphors, as other rhetoric figures, create an illusionary bridge of communication between the survivors and the gone.

On 24th March 2011, an official comment about the *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai* appeared on Yoshimoto's official website, both in Japanese and English. This comment is dated 16th March and consists in a brief note about what the author was doing at the time of the earthquake and her first impressions about the tsunami and the nuclear fallout at the Fukushima Daichi Nuclear Power Plant. Even though Yoshimoto (2012) did not clearly express her opinions about nuclear energy issue, a critical observation is reserved to the media, responsible for creating a state of scaremongering and desperation among the population (160). The adoption of a metaphorical language can also be interpreted as the choice to balance the horrifying images

shown by media by replacing them with soft images that only allude to the trauma suffered by the victims, preserving, at the same time, those days of mourning with the respects they deserved.

The novel presents a classical “BANANA plot”: the story begins with a car accident on the road to Kawaberi Town, in which the fiancée of the protagonist lost his life and the young girl, Ishiyama Sayako, was seriously injured. The convalescence and rehabilitation of Sayako corresponds to a “journey from life,” a sort of sabbatical year until her total recovery: the overcoming of the traumatic experience of the accident and the loss of her beloved Youichi.

The protagonist too, has to be considered as the typical young woman to whom Yoshimoto is used to give a leading role in her novels: Sayako actually portrays the typical shōjo who lost any interests in life together with her fiancée:

Move, move!, life told me. There is no lacuna, no goal to achieve. Only the stream, the motion. There is no solution that can make you feel better when a beloved person died. Without having the chance to meet him, you just feel bad for a while, everything become plumber, like when you wriggle in the mud, you just live in silence. Until when colours come to the world again. (Yoshimoto 2011: Afterwords)

A sense of apathy manifests itself as an auto-defensive response to pain: it reminds the *muyokuganbō* (無欲願望) described by the hibakusha author Ōta Yōko and defined as a physical condition of inappetence and total passivity of victims exposed to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (De Pieri 2014 : 47–57). A similar traumatic experience is witnessed by Sayako, whose apathetic and indolent state is unequivocally linked to the loss of Youichi: the interest toward life seems to have disappeared along with her beloved fiancée; Sayako shows no strength to struggle (hence the metaphor with the mud) because what actually lack is the desire and the willpower to live. The protagonist is then dragged by the stream, the inexorable impulse of daily routine: she is frozen in a jumpy rhythm-world where she acts only as an indifferent passive puppet. Sayako is actually “a dead in life,” a zombie, who is not able, or simply unconsciously refuses to, accept her new condition in order to start the recovery process looking for a new sense of life (Yoshimoto, Wataya 2013). In *Suīto hiaafutaa*, the emotional debate of the protagonist and the dreamscape atmosphere out of time give voice to the trauma in a universal language: “Are there people in this world, wrapped by the chance that life could become a white paper, like this?” (Yoshimoto 2011: Afterwords).

The description of the traumatic shock is realized by the choice of the word “white paper” (*shirogami* 白紙) which does not represent only a figure of speech rather an implicit reference to author’s activity: the writer used the metaphor of a white paper, untouched, empty, to describe the Tōhōku area devastation. What is remarkable is also the choice of the term *kikai* (機会) to express the “possibility.” In Japanese it deserves a positive connotation of chance: the writer

seems to revolutionise one more time the normal logic of thought and language by transforming the catastrophe in an opportunity to start over again. This is the denaturalisation of trauma: it is not a tragic insurmountable event but a favourable situation to a better change, instead. The metaphor of the “white paper” is just one of the many rhetoric figures that appear in text. Another thought-provoking image is the one of a rusty iron rod (tetsu no bou 鉄の棒) stuck in Sayako’s abdomen due to the car accident: it does not represent only a dramatic and unexpected event but also an example of denaturation of a familiar object into an element of alienation. Eventually, that iron rod was a common support used by the fiancée Youichi as a decorative component of the installations in his atelier; it is transformed by Yoshimoto in a no more neutral element able to take away Sayako’s life instead. The author makes the reader implicitly think about the role of nuclear power used for civic purposes: by setting up a metaphor between the iron rod and the nuclear power plants scattered all over the country, Yoshimoto tries to sensitise her readers about the destructive potential of this “supporting element” whose undeniable utility turns into a dangerous weapon on 11th March 2011. In the same way, the long-term hospitalization of the protagonist and her rehabilitation from the accident can be considered as an analogy for the efforts Japan must put into the recovery to overcome 11th March crisis: to train oneself in the rehabilitation is to reconstruct the socio-political texture of the country; to look for new friends able to help this recovering process can be interpreted as the attempt to find new source of energy in order to respond the demand for it. Yoshimoto’s protagonists suddenly—due to a traumatic event—rediscover feelings almost forgotten and now perceived with nostalgia; they feel the urgent need to release themselves through new models of gender in order to achieve a complete recovery: this healing process means to re-discover, to re-search the lost true self rather than re-inventing one self in a new way.

And that is exactly what happens in *Suited hiaafutaa* to the protagonist Sayako. According to a conversation with a barman in the last few pages of the novel, it is clear that a part of Sayako’s soul is still on that road to Kawaberi: to fully recover and overcome the trauma it is necessary to defeat it, going back to that road to symbolically recoup the lost soul of Sayako. Yoshimoto’s literary production can, without exaggeration, be defined as a “therapeutic” and “healing” narrative: a literary production in which writer’s sensitivity meets the small or big trauma suffered by the reader in his daily routine; the simple reading of Yoshimoto’s novels acts as a therapeutic means to overcome the struggle of life. Through the reconstruction of a new microcosm based on new moral values, Yoshimoto encourages her young readers to release themselves recognising in new social examples without ever losing one true self; her curative writing does not suggest utopian models far away from reality but spontaneously set up in a daily

life background in which everyone may suffer from pain and violence. “I believe that the profession of writer stands for cherishing hope no matter what situation” (Yoshimoto 2011).

Therefore, the author teaches how to “go on” despite the fear for the radiation sickness: *Suiito hiaafutaa* represents Yoshimoto’s response, in a perfect BANANA’s style, to the Daishinsai that stroke Japan on 11th March 2011; by proposing the authorial beloved themes in a simple but incisive language very close to her audience, the writer cherishes hope for a recovery to come:

I thought I cannot do nothing else but writing tightly for the few readers who, even though I do not know why, are helped and feel good thanks to my novels. (Yoshimoto 2011: Afterwords)

In these terms the author expresses her feelings once again in the postface of *Suiito hiaafutaa*: as a “nostalgic exercise” (Treat 1993: 380) Yoshimoto reflects about her literary production and along with the usual heartfelt thanks she adds comments and critiques to the novel. Yoshimoto’s efforts to help the victims of the Daishinsai to work thorough that traumatic experience, were then translated into a novel that will no more be labeled as a *tsukaisute* literary work but an everlasting nostalgic memory of that traumatic 11th March 2011, instead.

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SUMMARY

Nostalgia as a means to overcome trauma: the case of Yoshimoto Banana's "Sweet Hereafter"

The *natsukashisa* (nostalgia) is a common key to interpretation of novels written by the Japanese author Yoshimoto Banana. Considered as the desire for a replay of life, nostalgia is evaluated as a solution for the sensation of emptiness and solitude attributed to modern life; a gap that can be bridged by memory, recollection and flash-backs of the protagonists in Yoshimoto's novels. As a representation for something gone, the objects of this nostalgic feeling assume different forms in Yoshimoto's works: a faraway house, a lost person, a feeling perceived and then missed; dreams, hallucinations, images and paintings: everything is transformed by the author in a vehicle to allow the reader to sympathize with the protagonists and share the same nostalgic feeling. Author's attempt is to encourage the young readers to keep on seeking the lost self in the past in order to not betray one's identity. This is the main topic one can also recognise in her novel called *Sweet Hereafter*, a publication in which nostalgia for a self lost in a car accident is compared to the one felt by the *hisai* of Tōhoku region who lost everything after the earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan on 11th March 2011. Here Yoshimoto suggests *natsukashisa* as the possible way to overcome the traumatic experience of witnessing Japanese *Daishinsai*. This brief investigation proposes a literary case study that highlights the relation between trauma and memory, with a particular focus on nostalgia considered as a positive means for overcoming traumatic experience.

KEYWORDS

Yoshimoto Banana, nostalgia, 11th March 2011, *Sweet Hereafter*

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