

Literature and The Trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 文学と 広島・長崎のトラウマ

Daniela Tan

Trauma is a site that does not exist. No road leads there. No path leads around it. Trauma is. Inaccessible. Access through words seems to be blocked. How on earth can one speak about something that is impossible to express? What words could one use for a horror that is beyond the possibilities of language? How speak about something that cannot be spoken of-yet "the abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting"¹?

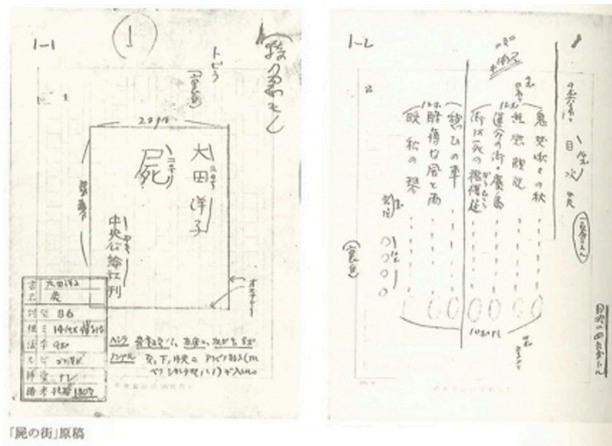
When on August 6 of 1945 shortly after eight, the morning of a steaming hot summer day in western Japan like the day before and the day before that, a uranium bomb exploded 600 meters over the center of Hiroshima city, the world knew nothing about nuclear violence and the destructive power of the atomic bomb. *Pikadon*, the onomatopoetic term for the dazzling flash of light and the thunder that followed, was one of the first names for what happened on this August morning. About 80,000 people lost their lives in that split-second, and other tens of thousands died later from the after-effects of radiation. The poet Hara Tamiki 原民喜 (1905-1951), who was only a mile from the epicenter, wrote that it was "as if the skin of the world around me was peeled off in an instant."²



Hara Tamiki

A bit more than three weeks later, a young writer's record of her personal experience was published in the *Asahi shimbun*. In the first literary treatment of the atomic bomb, Ōta Yōko 大田洋子 (1906-1963) describes the dropping of the atomic bomb and the immediate consequences for the people of Hiroshima.³ The young woman asked her relatives in the countryside, where she had fled lightly injured, for a pencil stub and scraps of paper and wrote down her impressions. She was awakened by the atomic flash, and she saw the images of her dream mix with the greenish blue light, a "light as on the bottom of the sea." Her brutal awakening is followed by the nightmare, the chaos of the burned and confused streams of people, the fragmentary information, snippets of conversations about rumors of the unknown weapon, medical information and depictions of the stoic and heroic people who were still using the ultranationalist war rhetoric: all this the author puts together like a collage. The word

gembaku-atomic bomb-doesn't appear yet. The brief text saw the light of day for one reason only: in the short time between the Japanese surrender on August 15 and the enactment of the press law of the American occupiers on September 19, there was no censorship. All later literary texts dealing with the atomic bomb could see print only long after the fact.



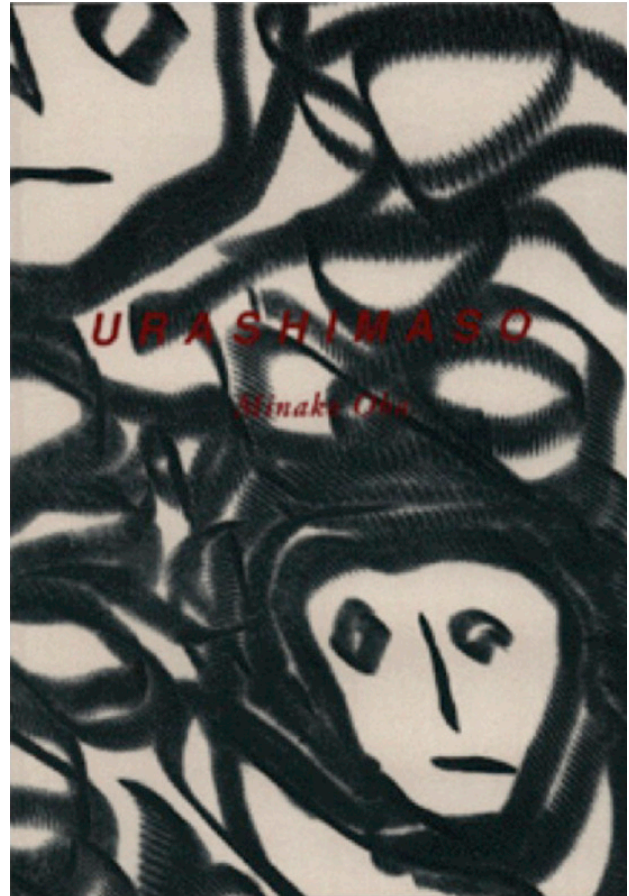
「屍の街」原稿

Ōta Yōko's handwritten notes

The genre of atomic bomb literature (*gembaku bungaku* 原爆文学) within Japanese literature of the twentieth century is unique, yet one can discern clear parallels to the literature of catastrophe in a wider sense. Atomic bomb literature understands the existence of nuclear weapons as a central problem of society and human civilization.

It can be divided roughly into four groups. The first is the works of authors who were directly affected, who witnessed the dropping of the bomb themselves and wrote about it in detail, like Hara Tamiki, Ōta Yōko or Agawa Hiroyuki 阿川弘之 (*1920). In the second group belong the works of authors who witnessed the droppings of the atomic bomb as children but whose autobiographical narratives often have the character of a requiem for victims of radiation sickness—family, neighbors, such as Nagasaki born Hayashi Kyōko 林京子 (*1930)

and manga artist Nakazawa Keiji 中沢啓治 (1939-2012), who documented what he witnessed in *Hadashi no Gen* はだしのゲン.



Urashimasō

Ōba Minako's 大庭みな子 (1930-2007) novel *Urashimasō* 浦島草⁴ (1977) lets the reader participate in this search to back-track the witnessed horror. The third group includes texts whose authors didn't witness the droppings of the bomb themselves but who work with the aid of data and interview material from victims of the atomic bomb, like for example *Shi no kage* 死の影 (1968) by the author Nakayama Shirō 中山士郎 (*1930). These texts were often published much later—for example, Ibuse Masuji's 井伏鱒二 (1898-1993) *Kuroi ame* 黒い雨 (Black Rain)⁵, in 1966. Ibuse structures the narrative through

the fictional figure of Shigematsu Shizuma, who copies passages from the diary of his niece Yasuko to send them to a marriage broker. As rumors circulate about Yasuko's infection with radiation sickness, it is almost impossible to arrange a marriage for her. Shigematsu is keen to give a most authentic account of the everyday life of those affected by the atomic bomb. For this reason, he inserts passages from his wife's diary as well, who mainly records her sadness about the daily search for food. In basing his narrative on various accounts and diary entries, Ibuse Masuji creates a polyphonic piece of work where the shock and uncertainty of the atomic bomb affect life in the weeks afterward. Within the frame of the story, these events are reflected and modified, and the result is a thematic accentuation and compression. In Japan at various times *Black Rain* and with it all atomic bomb literature have been heavily criticized: that these accounts lack literary qualities and serve as a cheap means for the authors to distinguish themselves, that they are descriptions mainly of political events.



Ōe Kenzaburō

Even Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 (*1935), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994, was confronted with a similar critique for his *Hiroshima nōto* 広島ノート (*Hiroshima notes*)⁶, published in 1965. Ōe had spent the war far from everything in rural Shikoku, but with *Hiroshima nōto*, he created an idiosyncratic political manifesto of pacifist humanism. His focus lies clearly on consequences of a psychological and political nature, for example, the problematic struggle to prove one suffered the after-effects of radiation sickness. An atomic bomb victim ID entitled the bearer to reduced fees on medical care. Aftereffects of radiation, such as leukemia, could be proven only after a long period of latency, which meant that those concerned had to run a long and painful bureaucratic obstacle course. Ōe exemplified an existentialist saint in his use of

the survivors of Hiroshima. For example, he described a survivor in Hiroshima, already marked by illness, who perseveres heroically in a demonstration in the summer heat. Some took this moment of exaggeration and distortion as manipulative appropriation and criticized it harshly. But by interlacing accounts of patients, extracts from white papers, and eye-witness reports, Ōe makes a broad variety of Hiroshima voices heard by a greater audience.

Eventually there are non-witness authors who use Hiroshima as a historical background scenario or stage for their novels, such as Tsuji Hitonari's 辻仁成 (*1959) 2001 novel *Taiyō machi* 太陽待ち (Waiting for the sun). In Murakami Ryū's 村上龍 (*1952) SF-like *Gofungo no sekai* 五分後の世界 (The world five minutes after) of 1994, a world is delineated that could have been after Japan didn't surrender and the droppings of the bombs went on, until finally a big part of the population escapes the contaminated surface of the world and moves to the underground.



Illustrated book cover Ōta Yōko

Ōta Yōko's sister asked, "You're really looking at them—how can you? I can't stand and look at corpses. Can you write—about something like this?" She answered: "I'm looking with two sets of eyes—the eyes of a human being and the eyes of a writer."⁷ The motives of seeing and witnessing are central in the first texts of atomic bomb literature. But what may seem documentary on first sight proves to be nothing more than an accumulation of splinters of reality, as these impressions are written down often in a shock-like state of the aftermath. As often caught by a single narrators perspective, the insertion of rumours and fragmentaric knowledge about what happened here enhances the view by adding other perspectives as well. Following the impulse to survive, the narrators—surrounded by the injured and the stench of the fires—try to make

their own what they went through and give an account of it to those who come after them.



Ōta Yōko youthful portrait

They give priority to witnessing. Hence the I-perspective of eye-witnesses. Their mere existence bears witness to what happened. For example, Hara Tamiki wrote *Natsu no hana* 夏の花 (Summer flowers, 1945)⁸ while suffering radiation sickness. The short novel should have been published in January 1946 under the title “The Atomic Bomb,” but censorship blocked it. It deals with the time immediately after the dropping of the bomb on August 6 in Hiroshima and the I-narrator’s flight from the approaching flames. His way down to the river leads him among the injured: “At first sight, rather than pity, I felt my hair stand on end.” Encounters with bleeding and injured friends and relatives give him only brief hope for their survival; his anxiety increases with every line. The I-narrator reflects, “Here everything human had been obliterated.” The text ends with the report of a certain N., who returns to the devastated city to search in vain for his wife.⁹

Hara Tamiki committed suicide in 1951 as a

reaction to the threat that the U. S. would use the atomic bomb in the Korean War.

In his memoir *Oboegaki* 覚書 (1945), Tōge Sankichi 峠三吉 (1917-1953) left a kaleidoscope of horrors. He depicted impressions from many perspectives that occurred in the brief period between August 6 and Japan’s surrender. He recounts in a fragmentary manner visits of the I-narrator to a camp for the injured, visits to dying acquaintance, and impressions of third parties. It is difficult at first for the reader to orient himself, for too many unstructured impressions overwhelm him. Certain images recur in the writings of other authors, for example, the description of a box of onions upset on the river bank, or a draft horse. The writers do not give priority to ordering the events; the only thing that counts is the attempt to hold the horror at arm’s length and fix it within what the writers thought up to that point was reality. The act of witnessing is followed by the expression of solidarity with the victims and with the movement against war. In the intervening years, the data about the process of radiation sickness has grown and produces more and more Japanese victims who have to fight for acceptance.



Ōta Yōko later photograph

These days one can observe a similar process when watching the consequences of the triple catastrophe of Fukushima. Life goes on, people start to forget, and the initial solidarity and engagement decrease, at the worst making way for the stigmatization of the victims, leading into a state of dissociation. The often-invoked Japanese stoic calmness in the face of catastrophes may be nothing other than a universal human reaction to trauma.



Hara Tamiki notebooks

In sum, writing about the unspeakable means to speak out and by doing so to fall short - a paradox that authors of atomic bomb literature confront. Memory is not linear. Occasionally, the separation into the I-who-tells and the I-who-experiences, both aspects of the same self but located at different points along the spatiotemporal continuum, disturbs the orientation. This phenomenon prevails especially among the authors who describe events that took place in their childhood. There is no path that leads to this space of memory, the place where trauma is located deeply in one's mind. Much is inchoate, and approach through language seems impossible. With the aid of narrative techniques such as overlap and consolidation, witnesses can shape the experience into a verbal form that is broad enough and does not implode or freeze. Overlapping impressions result in a semantic accumulation, a condensation that creates the ambivalence that is significant for the authentic narration of trauma. On a lexical level expressions of inchoateness and amorphousness serve the depiction of things

that are hard to verbalize. The fragmentary character of many texts of atomic bomb literature indicates a state of dissociation, where events can no longer be integrated. Apparent calm mirrors the psychic numbness that follows immediately on the trauma—and the realization that one has survived. Later this state can develop into deep apathy. The ghostly, haunted experience of reading atomic bomb literature comes from an associative approach, wherein the reader opens the door to memory and enters a place that does not exist.

Daniela Tan is a lecturer and research fellow at Zurich University, Switzerland. She has studied at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Osaka University and Zurich University. Her Ph.D. is from Zurich University. Her dissertation on Ōba Minako in the context of the *naikō no sedai* (Introverted generation) will be published in winter 2014. Written in German for a general audience, this essay, published in the journal *magazin Die Zeitschrift der Universität Zürich* in May 2013 (p. 46-47), is part of her research project on atomic bomb literature. This translation is her own; she thanks Richard H. Minear for editorial help.

Recommended citation: Daniela Tan, "Literature and The Trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 40, No. 3, October 6, 2014.

Related articles

- Mark Selden, Bombs Bursting in Air: State and citizen responses to the US firebombing and Atomic bombing of Japan (<https://apjjf.org/-Mark-Selden/4065>)
- Yuki Tanaka, Photographer Fukushima Kikujiro - Confronting Images of Atomic Bomb Survivors (<https://apjjf.org/-Yuki-TANAKA/3623>)
- Robert Jacobs, The Atomic Bomb and Hiroshima on the Silver Screen: Two New Documentaries (<https://apjjf.org/-Robert-Jacobs/3619>)
- Linda Hoaglund, ANPO: Art X War - In Havoc's Wake (<https://apjjf.org/-Linda-Hoaglund/3616>)
- Kyoko Selden, Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Messages from Hibakusha: An Introduction (<https://apjjf.org/-Kyoko-Selden/3612>)
- Ōishi Matashichi and Richard Falk, *The Day the Sun Rose in the West. Bikini, the Lucky Dragon and I* (<https://apjjf.org/-Oishi-Matashichi/3566>)
- Robert Jacobs, Whole Earth or No Earth: The Origin of the Whole Earth Icon in the Ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (<https://apjjf.org/-Robert-Jacobs/3505>)
- Robert Jacobs, 24 Hours After Hiroshima: National Geographic Channel Takes Up the Bomb (<https://apjjf.org/-Robert-Jacobs/3446>)
- Nakazawa Keiji, Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen (<https://apjjf.org/-Nakazawa-Keiji/3416>)
- John W. Dower, Ground Zero 1945: Pictures by Atomic Bomb Survivors (https://apjjf.org/-John_W_-Dower/1604)

Notes

¹ Adorno, Theodor, *Notes to Literature III*, Berlin 1965, S. 125-126.

² Hara, Tamiki quoted in Itō Narihiko, Sigfried Schaarschmidt and Wolfgang Schamoni (eds.): *Seit jenem Tag. Hiroshima und Nagasaki in der japanischen Literatur*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984, p. 201.

³ Ōta Yōko 大田洋子. *Kaitei no yō na hikari. Genshi bakudan no kūshū ni atte* 海底のような光。原子爆弾の空襲に遭って, 1945. (In: *Ōta Yōko zenshū 2*, Nihon tosho sentā, 2001, p. 275-280)

⁴ English translation by Yu Oba: *Urashimasō*.

Saitama-ken: Josai University. Center for Inter-Cultural Studies and Education, 1995.

⁵ An English translation by John Bester appeared in 2012 at Kodansha America under the title *Black Rain*.

⁶ English translation by David L. Swain and Toshi Yonezawa appeared 1995 at Grove Press under the title *Hiroshima notes*.

⁷ Translation in Minear, *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, p. 4.

⁸ An English translation by Richard Minear of the whole text is available in the volume *Hiroshima. Three witnesses*, edited by Richard Minear. Princeton University Press, 1990.

⁹ Translation in Minear, *Hiroshima*, pp. 52, 57. “*Natsu no hana*” is the title both of the first section of the book, which appeared Hara completed in 1945 (it appeared in 1947), and of the book as a whole, which appeared in *Mita bungaku*, June 1947.