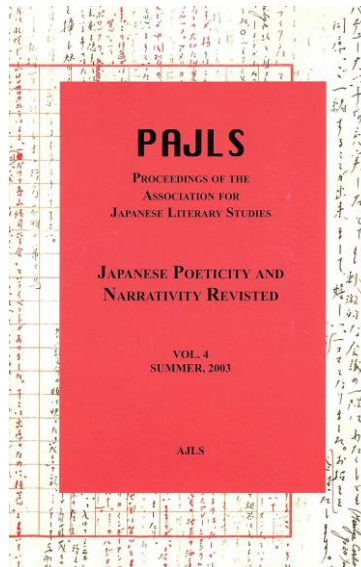


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**PLAIN WATER WITH A TWIST OF LIME(STONE):
MAGICAL REALISM IN MEDORUMA SHUN**

Davinder L. Bhowmik
University of Washington

Narratives of war memory abound in fiction from Okinawa, the sole Japanese prefecture that experienced extensive land combat in World War II. Among the corpus of such narratives, two stories of the Battle of Okinawa, in which one-third of the island's civilian population and thousands of Japanese and American soldiers were killed, stand out conspicuously. "Kame no kōbaka," (Turtleback Tombs, 2000) written by Ōshiro Tatsuhiro in 1966 is perhaps the benchmark by which subsequent narratives of the Battle are compared.¹ A grim tale of one family's survival in a cramped ancestral tomb, "Turtleback Tombs" conforms to conventions of war narratives in both its realist fiction form, and its weighty content.

One of Okinawa's most prominent intellectuals, Medoruma Shun, was not widely known until 1997 when he won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, though he had received regional literary prizes since the early 1980s. Known foremost as a first-rate author, Medoruma is also a provocative social critic whose essays appear regularly in a myriad of local and national news journals. Extremely private by nature, Medoruma has nevertheless curiously averred that he does not wish to be regarded as an Okinawan writer, yet he has repeatedly chosen to write about the Battle of Okinawa, a major theme among postwar writers from the prefecture.

Medoruma's 1996 Akutagawa Prize winning story "Suiteki," (Droplets, 2000), written some thirty years after Ōshiro's work, departs wholly from the previous tradition of war narrative in Okinawa.² In this unlikely story of a man who awakens to find his leg swollen to the size of

¹ Ōshiro Tatsuhiro, "Kame no kōbaka," *Okinawa bungaku zenshū*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1990), 221-256. An English translation by Steve Rabson appears in *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 113-154.

² Medoruma Shun, *Suiteki* (Tokyo: Bungei shunjū, 1997), 5-50. There are two English translations of this story to date. The first by Adam Fulford appears in *Japanese Literature Today*, no. 23 (Tokyo: Japan P.E.N. Club, 1998), 26-45. A second translation by Michael Molasky appears in *Southern Exposure*, 255-285. Both are fine translations, though the latter attempts the difficult task of representing the nuanced speech of certain rustic Okinawan characters by employing a modified Appalachian dialect.

a gourd, and whose big toe emits water that phantom soldiers come nightly to imbibe, Medoruma injects large doses of humor. Some of the sources of this humor are the author's use of local dialect in the speech of his country bumpkin protagonist Tokushō and other villagers, and his employment of a comedic sub theme featuring a rascally character, Seiyū, who hits on the idea of marketing the toe water that contains Viagra-like properties. In this paper, I will first argue that the fresh appeal of Medoruma's fiction lies in his use of the magical realist mode, a strain of postmodern writing, before considering the implications of this break with realist mimetic fiction.

Wendy Farris proposes the following five characteristics of magical realist fiction in her theory of the mode: First, the texts contain an irreducible element of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe. In "Suiteki" this would be Tokushō's strange and sudden illness that defies medical science—the village physician can find no physical abnormality—the inexplicable appearance of phantom soldiers, and the emergence of water from Tokushō's toe. Second, the writing contains a detailed description of the phenomenal world. This is the "realism" of the oxymoron magical realism. In "Suiteki," apart from Tokushō's illness, the narrative description is completely realistic. The material world is present in all its detailed and concrete variety. Third, in these texts, readers may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events and experience doubts. Readers of "Suiteki" invariably wonder whether the phantoms Medoruma writes of are simply figments of Tokushō's imagination or part of his dream world. Fourth, there is a near merging of two realms. As "Suiteki" progresses we learn that the phantoms are long dead soldiers, liminal figures occupying a position between the living and dead world. The fifth and final feature of magical realist fiction is that it questions received ideas of time, space, and identity. In "Suiteki," Medoruma does not simply narrate the events of the Battle of Okinawa, he extends the Battle forward fifty some years after its conclusion to question his protagonist's repression of war memory and self-deception.³

Based on Farris' characteristics, clearly Medoruma's "Suiteki" is a magical realist work; other major works by Medoruma in this vein are *Mabuigumi* with its bedridden protagonist whose body is occupied by a

³ Wendy B. Farris, "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 163-190.

giant crab, and *Gunchō no ki* in which masses of butterflies gather around a magical setting where two lovers meet.⁴

Here, I will focus my discussion on “Suiteki” for three reasons: its publication established Medoruma as the leading contemporary writer in Okinawa; the work has been translated not once, but twice into English translation, making it his most well-known work outside Japan, and most importantly, its central scenes are peopled with ghosts, a stock fixture of magical realist texts.

While ghosts are the main bridge used to link the contemporary world with the past in “Suiteki” other features of the work suggest the slipperiness of time. The story’s Kafkaesque opening in which the protagonist, Tokushō, wakes to discover his leg swollen to the size of a gourd is unsettling until the phantom soldiers begin visiting to drink water linking past to present. The nightly visits by the soldiers makes clear the story’s theme of repressed war memory, particularly that of the protagonist’s breaking his promise to return with water to the cave where his comrade Ishimine lay wounded in the midst of battle. However, the suggestion of war in this tale set in the present comes earlier, in the first page: “Tokushō’s right leg, which had already ballooned to the size of a medium-sized wax gourd, was a moist whitish green, and his toes fanned out like the heads of a family of tiny snakes.”⁵ The relationship between gourds and war is a subtle one, lost on many readers unaware that in the immediate postwar period, enormous gourds proliferated, seemingly nurtured by soil enriched by the corpses of war dead.⁶

A second and far subtler hint of an intermingling of past and present surfaces in a scene in which Dr. Ōshiro, the local physician, reports that the liquid taken from Tokushō’s toe for laboratory examination is simply water *with a trace of lime*. As in the story’s fantastic beginning, the properties of the water contain an element linked to wartime, namely lime from the many natural limestone caves used for hiding during the Battle of Okinawa.

The story’s very literal climax, in which the physical sensation of Ishimine’s tongue on Tokushō’s foot causes Tokushō to ejaculate, is humorously marked by Medoruma, but also underscores the work’s complexity. The nightly phantom soldiers’ visits stir up in Tokushō

⁴ Medoruma Shun, *Mabuiigumi* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 1999); *Gunchō no ki* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 2001).

⁵ “Droplets,” 255.

⁶ Medoruma notes the prevalence of these abnormally large vegetables in war torn Okinawa and China in his words of acceptance following his receipt of the Akutagawa Prize. See “Jushō no kotoba,” *Bungei shunjū*, 1997, 9, 424.

deeply repressed memories of his cowardice and force him to realize the tales of heroism he has been regaling schoolchildren with during the yearly anniversaries commemorating the Battle are based on nothing but his own self-deception. Realizing this, Tokushō asks Ishimine for forgiveness. In the puzzling homoerotic scene that follows Medoruma writes:

“Ishimine, forgive me!”

The color had begun to return to Ishimine’s pale face, and his lips regained their luster. Tokushō, despite his fear and self-hatred, grew aroused. Ishimine’s tongue glided across the opening on his toe, and then Tokushō let out a small cry with his sexual release.

The lips pulled away. Lightly wiping his mouth with his index finger, Ishimine stood up. He was still seventeen. A smile took shape—around those eyes that stared out beneath the long lashes, on the spare cheeks, on the vermillion lips.

Tokushō burst into anger. “Don’t you know how much I’ve suffered these past fifty years?” Ishimine merely continued to smile, nodding slightly at Tokushō, who flailed his arms in an effort to sit up.

“Thank you. At last the thirst is gone.” Speaking in well-accented standard Japanese, Ishimine held back a smile, saluted, and bowed deeply. He never turned to look back at Tokushō as he slowly vanished into the wall. A newt scampered across the wall’s stained surface and caught an insect.

At dawn, Tokushō’s wail echoed throughout the village.⁷

There are many interesting things to note about this scene, one of which is Medoruma’s attentiveness to language. Even during a magical episode such as this one, details are painstakingly accurate. While the speech of Tokushō, his wife Ushi, rascally cousin Seiyū and other older Okinawans is marked with a heavy local dialect throughout the work, the few words in the text voiced by Ishimine are conspicuously rendered into standard Japanese conforming entirely to the reality of the prewar period when edicts prohibited the use of local dialect and were pushed to an extreme during wartime when speaking in dialect was considered punishable by death.⁸

⁷ “Droplets,” 281-282.

⁸ For a harrowing view of the dangers of speaking in dialect during the Battle of

Another point to note about the scene is that Medoruma, who has posited Tokushō as an aggressor for his self-serving wartime action, rather than another in the cast of victims of the Battle, shows that while this is the case, his protagonist has also suffered from keeping secret his past behavior. This scene, in particular, and the story as a whole muddies the distinction between victim and aggressor. It also explains why Tokushō, fond of drink, women, and song, indulges in escapist pleasures.⁹

Through the discord wrought by idiosyncratic, private memories that Tokushō relives and public memories of the Battle of Okinawa that are standardized variously through film, memorials, and tourism, the story resists any smooth reading.¹⁰ Even the conclusion offers no satisfying answer to questions raised in “Suiteki.” Most disturbing of all is why Tokushō remains fundamentally unchanged even after he has painfully recalled his past and acknowledged his betrayal. The reader is by no means assured that Tokushō will rectify his errant ways, in fact, Medoruma suggests otherwise as he describes the recovered Tokushō take up his former vices, of drinking, gambling, and womanizing. This rather bleak conclusion may simply indicate that the story has shifted from a fantastic to a realistic mode, however, given Medoruma’s predilection for critique, it is tempting to read the ending as a rebuke of Tokushō’s habits, and perhaps even of Okinawans, who, content in escapist pleasures, share his apathy.

As mentioned earlier the phantom soldiers of “Suiteki” link the real and the magical worlds, and are the device by which Medoruma forces his readers to question generally held views of the past that portray Okinawans uniformly as victims of the Battle. Not only are the ghosts what yoke together the magic and the real in “Suiteki,” they are also the

Okinawa, see Toyama Ichirō, “Spy Mobilization and Identity in Wartime Okinawa,” in *Japanese Civilization in the Modern World*, Senri Ethnological Studies, no. 51 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000), 121-132.

⁹ The protagonist’s first name, Tokushō, suggests the deed of profiting, as indicated in the Japanese phrase *toku o suru*. Certainly, Medoruma is casting aspersions on Tokushō’s ethically dubious acts of telling highly embellished war stories to schoolchildren. In case the reader misses the punned name, Medoruma has Ushi twice warn her errant husband Tokushō: “You start fibbin’ and makin’ up sorry tales to profit off the war and you’ll get your fair punishment in the end.”/“You’ll get your comeuppance for tryin’ to profit of people’s sufferin’ in the war,” “Droplets,” 271, 272.

¹⁰ For an excellent analysis of the limits and possibilities of memory see Lisa Yoneyama’s *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

most concrete example of the binarisms that Medoruma's work rejects. In a world Geoffrey Hartman describes as plagued by "information sickness," and in which individuals are left to wade through a sea of media representations that cleave rather than bridge public and personal experiences, Medoruma introduces his ghosts to keep memories of the past in active recall.¹¹ Indeed, Medoruma's ghosts are vital during these perilous times when memory is in constant jeopardy from both unnatural media reiterations and natural weathering.

The fact that much magical realist writing comes from former colonies is not simply a coincidence. In these areas that have experienced great historical shifts, novelists write out of a sense of cultural displacement—displacement of traditional communities, the ruin of the land. Their works are invariably political, allegorical, and subversive, challenging dominant modes of thought. Medoruma, whom several critics have dubbed "Okinawa's Lu Xun", is revolutionary for his treatment of Okinawa's bloody entanglement in WWII. His work calls into serious question several binarisms: past and present, public and private, victim and aggressor, the magic and the real. The magical realist mode he consistently employs has no privileged center: the metropole, Tokyo, is not replaced by the peripheral, Okinawa, rather the writing is what Theo L. D'haen calls "ex-centric."¹² It speaks from the margins, to critique widely held and internalized notions.

While the magical realist qualities I have discussed are what endear Medoruma to his readers, there is an assaultive quality of his works that is difficult to ignore. He challenges not only those in the Japanese main islands to consider the unreasonableness of demands made on the Okinawan populace, but more pointedly, he demands that Okinawans themselves question their wholesale participation in the prewar state's ideology and their individual actions during the Battle.

In closing, I would like to discuss briefly the implications of Medoruma's use of the magical realist mode as a current in postmodern writing. While Medoruma's writing is certainly fresh and innovative, the fact that his works center on questions of history and memory makes the ground on which Medoruma treads risky territory. What is at stake in writing in a highly imaginative mode when dealing with the theme of war? Certainly, for someone born fifteen years after the end of WWII, to

¹¹ Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Public Memory and Modern Experience," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, volume 6, number 2 (1993), 239.

¹² Theo L. D'haen, "Magical Realism and Postmodernism" in *Magical Realism*, 194.

take up the contentious topic of war memory is a bold move in and of itself.

Like Kobayashi Yoshinori, the *manga* artist who has created a sensation in and outside Japan through his depictions of selected war memories of the Japanese language generation in colonial Taiwan, Medoruma culls individual experiences and fashions them to posit certain views of the past.¹³ While Medoruma's imaginative writing on the war lacks the ideological fervor of Kobayashi's *manga*, his work resembles Kobayashi's in its interrogation of the war, broadly speaking, and in its consideration of the transmission of memory between generations, more specifically. Though Kobayashi and Medoruma stand worlds apart politically, they share the distinction of taking up, to various ends, the territory of war memory. In her 1975 debut, *Matsuri no ba* ("Ritual of Death," 1984) Hayashi Kyōko, the acclaimed writer of atomic bomb fiction, voices through her wise protagonist the importance of stirring individuals' feelings of the bombing no matter what the form:

The *Asahi* of October 10, 1970, carried an article under the headline: "Monster Cartoons of Atomic Bomb Patients in Shogakkan's *Second Grader's Monthly*: Middle School Student Criticizes Cruelty of Cartoons." A middle school girl was reported to have declared that it was cruel to liken an atomic bomb patient to a monster. Her controversial comment referred to "Super Planetman," one of the forty-five monsters illustrated in "Atomic Bomb Planetman," has a human shape but is covered with keloid scars. Questioned about his intentions, the publisher said he could not comment until he investigated the matter. Members of the group known as Readers of Atomic Bomb document, strongly attacked the illustration.

The incident really did leave a deep impression on us. It was a taste of the cruelty of Time-equals-Oblivion. But the atomic bomb needs no sentimentality. Let them be, the cartoonists. *Whether they draw monsters or clowns, they will stimulate someone to feel something about the bombing. Now, thirty years later, it has become difficult to portray the facts as they were.*¹⁴ (italics my own)

¹³ Kobayashi Yoshinori. *Shin gōmanizumu senden* (Tokyo: Shōgakkan, 2001).

¹⁴ Hayashi Kyōko, "Ritual of Death," translated by Kyoko Selden in *Nuke-Rebuke: Writers & Artists Against Nuclear Energy & Weapons*, edited by Morty Sklar (Iowa City: The Spirit That Moves Us Press, 1984), 33-34.

In "Suiteki," Medoruma employs the mode of magical realism, available to writers the world over, and wins not only transnational readership, but succeeds in revitalizing war narratives, an exhausted form of expression in Okinawa until the publication of his probing piece of fiction. "Suiteki" has become the new benchmark for narratives of the Battle as Medoruma replenishes a tired form of fiction with his magical water.