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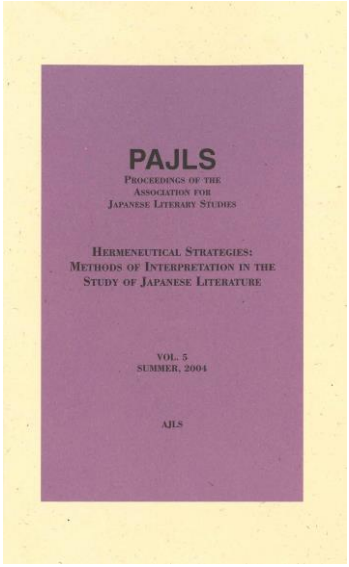

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SHINJUKU AS "*IKAI*:" LEVY HIDEO'S *SEIJŌKI NO KIKOENAI HEYA*[1]

Kōji Satō

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the theme, "the hermeneutics of transgression and gender," analyzing certain phenomena from a literary text concerning crossing national borders. This article examines the novel entitled *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya* (The Room in which the Sound of American Flag Cannot Be Heard) as an example.

"Transgression," the term I use here, has two meanings. First, it means crossing the boundary into another country. Secondly, it also means crossing a boundary in gender and sexuality. The former definition is clear, because we can find geographical boundary lines easily. The latter one is not always clear, because it is difficult to find transitions of our body or mind. This article insists that in *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya*, these two meanings of "transgression" are intricately connected.

Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya is Levy Hideo's first novel written in Japanese. It was astonishing and unprecedented to contemporary Japanese literary circles that a native speaker of English published a novel in Japanese. It is a shame, though, that during the past 10 or more years since it was published, we have found hardly any critics attempting a detailed analysis of the text despite the sensation it caused at the time.[2] I believe that the reason for it is not because of the content of the novel, but because we have yet to fully study "the hermeneutics of transgression and gender" in exploring the text further.

Of course, I will not argue a comprehensive meaning of the term, "the hermeneutics of transgression and gender." This paper is limited to presenting an interpretation of how to read *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya,* written by an American writer who learned Japanese as a second language in the late 20th century. However, it is a mistake if you only see this hermeneutics as an isolated argument. It is beyond this article to examine if this argument has some kind of universality. We need further research to come to a conclusion.

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[1] I would like to thank Mizuta Noriko, Kitada Sachie, Ikeuchi Yasuko, Ishii Chiaki for their detailed comments and suggestions.

[2] But there are a few exceptions. See Komori, pp. 283-313; Tsuchida Tomonori and Aoyanagi Etsuko, pp. 226-259; Yoshihara. These theses are especially important.

The three keywords of this paper are gender, sexuality, and orientalism. Examining orientalism allows us to reach an "interpretation" that a kind of "place" represents a peculiar illusion in the text. Then, the rest of the keywords, "gender" and "sexuality," will demonstrate how such an illusion is described in the text.

ORIENTALISM

First of all, I would like to start by discussing orientalism. The main theme of the novel, *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya,* is the transgression of borders from the West to the East, in this case, from the United States to Japan. The text, however, does not seem to contain the apparent element of "orientalism," because there are no such stereotypical images as beautiful oriental scenery or exotic women in kimono.

The summary of the work is as follows. A 17-year-old American boy, Ben, was brought to Japan by his father, who was a diplomat. With the setting of Tokyo in the late 1960s, the story is just about a series of incidents. The boy runs away from home, meets Japanese people, finds a job and eventually enters Japanese society. As you can see, the text portrays a white American man crossing borders to come to Japan, but it does not mean that the text contains orientalism. Nevertheless, I believe that it is still worth questioning whether or not the text is related to orientalism since the topos of "Shinjuku," a city in the Orient, is incorporated into the text significantly.

Ben identifies Tokyo as a place symbolized by *Hiragana* (the Japanese cursive syllabary). According to the text, *Hiragana* is considered as a phonogram like alphabets. Thus Ben, the runaway boy who knows very little Japanese, only recognizes Tokyo as "the world of Hiragana," in other words, "the world represented only by its sound" (53). Similarly, the text emphasizes that Ben also perceives Shinjuku, one of the districts in Tokyo, as a place symbolized by *Hiragana.* In short, they are episodes showing an experience where one identifies some Japanese place only phonetically with Hiragana rather than ideographically with *Kanji* (a Chinese character used in Japanese writing). If so, then, this novel may be considered as just a collection of such episodes merely describing ordinary incidents experienced by any foreign visitor to Japan. My question is what kind of unique connotation Shinjuku has here, compared to other places in Tokyo.

Indeed, among other names of places, the particular sound of "Shinjuku" has haunted the boy persistently—even before he actually goes there (63-67). Yet, the text does not provide us with any clear reason for

the uniqueness of Shinjuku.[3] Therefore we need to re-interpret this text in order to read this "blank." My reading, if I tell it to you in advance, is that it is associated with the boy's sexual illusions. Of course it is not clearly written in the text, but the novel actually infers that the district Shinjuku contains thriving sex industries.

Now, referring to the historical and geographical context outside of the text, Shinjuku is known as a subcenter of Tokyo with skyscrapers, but it is also famous as one of the largest commercial districts in Japan, which is congested with a variety of forms of sexual trade. They include numerous businesses not only for heterosexuals but also for lesbians and gays. Originally, Shinjuku was known as an area of prostitution back in the Edo Period. Since about 1965, the district has changed to what it is today.[4] Thus we need to be aware of such a context of Shinjuku as background knowledge in order to "interpret" *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya*, a story set in 1969. On the other hand, we also note that the boy hardly knows about Shinjuku and its context; he only has a vague image of the place such as a district of something sexual. In this text, his ignorance of the district and his perception of the phonogram, *Hiragana*, are significantly related to each other. The boy recognizes Shinjuku as a topos consisting of indefinite meanings and sound. Therefore, the boy considers Shinjuku as a signifier to be something unstable, which never determines a signified.

In other words, we can say that Shinjuku is represented as an unsubstantial area. Edward W. Said points out in *Orientalism* that orientalists have represented the East as an "idea," an unsubstantial area (1, 4-5). Moreover, he maintains, those western novelists in the 19th century have mass-produced works illustrating sexual experiences in "place" of the Orient (190). Although most of the works mentioned by Said in *Orientalism* deal with Arab/Muslim regions, some might suspect that Levy Hideo just portrays contemporary Japan as another part of the Orient. Then, my second question arises here—"shall we consider Levy to be only a writer included in the list of orientalists defined by Said?" Such a question, again, inevitably requires us to prepare alternative "hermeneutics" in order to analyze Levy, the author who appeared in the late 20th century.

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[3] See Sedgwick, pp. 3-4. She discusses the relationship between sexuality and "the speech act of a silence."

[4] See Kawamura, p. 104.

SHINJUKU AS "*IKAI*"

In the text, Shinjuku is a topos where identity troubles are caused. It is a place where people are confronted with fundamental issues such as gender and sexuality, even beyond races or nationalities. Now I would like to apply the Japanese word "*Ikai*" to the place of "Shinjuku." In Japanese, "*Ikai*" means some dangerous but seductive area outside of such system as codes and conventions. Although the whole country seems to be *Ikai* to the boy in the first place, the city of Shinjuku particularly seems to be the zone of chaos.

According to Momokawa Takahito, "*Ikai*" has been described repeatedly by Japanese narrative since early times.[5] For example, we can call "*Tokoyo no Kuni*" and "*Yomi no Kuni*"(the land of the dead) in remote ages and "*Yamazato*"(a village in a mountain valley) in the middle ages (53). He also defines the term "*Ikai*." It "exists outside of a community." In other words, it "exists as a different place from a community united system, or as a mysterious place and Other World which people of a community cannot put into words" (58). I do not intend to say, however, that "Japan" and "Shinjuku" are "*Ikai*" by nature. Rather, I insist that they are perceived as "*Ikai*" by the boy only because they are foreign places.

In this novel, the following monologue by Ben eloquently shows his identity trouble caused in *Ikai*, Japan.

> Ben imagined the words that he called himself one after another. He had called himself "I" and "me" since his childhood. Also he learned "*watashi*" and "*boku*" at seventeen years old. And he had started to call himself "*ore*" since when he got to know Andō.... But he thought that these words don't fit anything for his broken face, reflected in the mirror. He moved. A fine line of sunlight from outside went through dust, and sparkled in the surface of the broken glass... He felt that he was seduced toward somewhere, over a warped light. There was only emptiness behind any of his names, even though he stared hard at his reflection in the broken glass. He was frightened. He looked away from the mirror, and he went back to the door quickly. (21-22)

Looking at the broken mirror, Ben feels that none of words such as "I," "me," "*watashi*," "*boku*" or "*ore*" can represent himself. Moreover, Ben feels that there is only emptiness behind any of the first personal

[5] *Ikai* itself as a word/term began to be used recently in Japan, however. See Momokawa, p. 52.

pronouns in English and Japanese. In the above quotation, the word "emptiness" suggests that the signifier, which is supposed to be in back signified, is uncertain.

By the way, the primary theme of the whole text seems to be alienation experienced by foreigners in Japan. Surely we can also interpret the quotation as such an expression of alienation. But it is not enough. In the quotation, Ben thought not only "there was only emptiness behind any of his names," but "he was seduced toward somewhere, over a warped light." It is important the nihilistic "darkness" is not written but rather "a warped light" is written here. In my reading, "a warped light" connects with a sparkling Shinjuku neon sign in the darkness of night. Assuming that there is certain association between identity trouble and the topos of "Shinjuku," we then come across the hidden narrative of the novel. Both share common ground in terms of indefinite signified; thus we realize that the novel is not only about a sense of alienation, but also about something which we need alternative codes of interpretation to understand, which are gender and sexuality.

You may have thought that this interpretation is strained, if you have read *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya*. It is not to be denied that the novel as a whole is covered with a tone of alienation. However, if you do close reading, you ought to notice the hidden narrative. In the text, Ben has moved from country to country since his childhood. These are Asian countries, such as Hong Kong, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, and Taipei in Taiwan. He has experienced that "he was praised as '*Bikoku*'(the beautiful country; the United States), or abused as '*Shiro oni*'(a white ogre; a white man)" because of his blond hair, white skin, and blue eyes (10). That is to say, it has been quite natural for him to experience alienation as a stranger. Why does he get so alienated as to lose his identity, then, in Japan? Here I am convinced that his experience in Japan is not only alienation as a stranger. Rather he realizes that he cannot identify himself by national identity any longer. He finds that he cannot identify himself either as English or Japanese. Moreover, he cannot identify himself by any language in the world. It is the exposed self that transcends the bounds of our body, which is beyond nationality and race. But we cannot represent such self by words in our ordinary world. Therefore his face is "broken," and he cannot recognize this self by words. Because he finds this self is separate from this world, it is natural for him to desire to enter Shinjuku as "*Ikai*".

GENDER / SEXUALITY

Ben is confronted with fundamental issues such as gender and sexuality after his national identity has collapsed. It relates to the basis of

our identity, although I do not insist that issues as gender and sexual identity should be politically and culturally more important than national identity. However, it is a fact that in most modern western countries, if not all countries as Sigmund Freud's texts shows us, people have recognized that gender and sexuality exist inside, in the dark side, and are the root of our body.

Within the text, Ben, who transgressed borders to Japan, is represented as "female," in a sense.[6] I will give you two reasons. Firstly, as his father identifies Japan as a feminine place (58), which, by the way, is certainly an orientalist point of view,[7] the son cannot help but be aware of his entering a feminine zone. Secondly, there is an episode in which Ben is overlapped with Helen Keller learning alphabets for the first time (59). Both incidents reveal that there is a strategy to feminize him within the hidden narrative.

Furthermore, according to Yoshihara Mari, we can find a "homosexual image" in the relationship between Ben and Andō (93). For example, Andō follows the palm of Ben's hand by his finger over and over again in order to teach *Hiragana* letter (Levy, 59). This obstinate physical contact is designed to imply some homosexual relationship between them.

But I do not argue Ben is a "true" gay, or he has feminine wishes. Rather he is not aware of his own desire. Japan is the place that shakes "the natural" of gender and sexuality in his recognition. Therefore, his gender and sexual identities move unstably between a male and a female or a heterosexual and a homosexual. He is so attracted by "Shinjuku" because his gender and sexual identities are unstable. He regards it as the place which reveals his authentic desire.

However, Said says it is the conventional orientalist method to see the Orient as the area of another set of system, "out there" (67), the "*Ikai*" as I previously called it. Nevertheless, I do not think that the author Levy Hideo is an orientalist because he used a method to foreground such illusions. At the end of the novel, the protagonist finally realizes that his thoughts of "Shinjuku" are just an illusion.

> Ben turned his eyes overhead. Shinjuku's early morning light was shining in through the ventilating opening. The light was hitting his white nude arm. He recalled the autumn evening. At that time, Andō said to me "That is Shinjuku" pointing his forefinger at the far light. But it was just the light that was

[6] See Tsuchida Tomonori and Aoyanagi Etsuko, p. 240. They write Ben has "femininity" in a note of *Bungaku riron no purakutyisu*.

[7] See, for example, Said, pp. 207-208. See also Ueno.

> flowing from the ventilating opening. It was the common and early morning light. (191)

One day, Ben comes to work at a café of Shinjuku. The above quotation is an incident that took place in the locker room. Shinjuku's "the far light" Andō pointed his finger at seduced him not long ago. And he took the light as the entrance to "*Ikai*." Now "Shinjuku's light," however, is only reflected as "just the light" in his eyes. Therefore, the quotation implies the following. Although he found out his own fundamental desire in Shinjuku as "*Ikai*," he finally realized that "Shinjuku" was not "*Ikai*." In other words, we can say that Ben's desire keeps transgressing a variety of boundaries without being definitely signified or without any proper English or Japanese translation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Seijōki no Kikoenai Heya* does not contain "orientalism" as discussed by Said. The problem of "orientalism" is the way in which some kind of desire is fixed in a particular "place" called "the Orient" through the Western point of view. In contrast, this contemporary novel has a critical point of view toward such orientalism. It certainly reflects disruption of the unified identity as a postmodern subject. By paying a lot more attention to fundamental issues of identity such as gender and sexuality, we have obtained an alternative perspective that sheds light on the way of transgression from the West to the East. Again, it is "the hermeneutics of transgression and gender" that enables me to read the texts that way.

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