“Recreating Woman’s Identity in a Trans-cultural In-between Space: Ōba Minako’s *Oregon yume jūya*”

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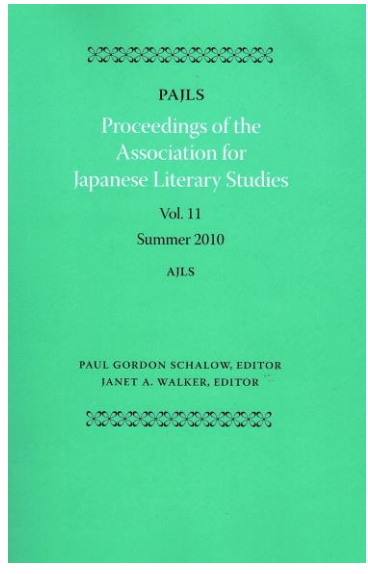

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Recreating Woman's Identity in a Trans-cultural In-between Space

Ōba Minako's *Oregon yume jūya*

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Things then float up to the surface–those things I have not forgotten, things I wanted to forget but couldn't, things that come back to me on their own–these become the material for my fiction.

–Ōba Minako

. . . by reading other women's autobiographies, women find their unvoiced aspirations in their own experiences.

–Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson

It is the trans-cultural dimension of the years spent abroad, in the United States, that shapes the new female identity of the writing of Ōba Minako: here, the author develops an *écriture* transcending the limits of time and space and questioning the meaning of the "third space" where she lives.

The cultural identity of the migrant—or the wanderer—is a constant process of construction and deconstruction, as well as being made up of doubts—desperate, yet at the same time, false and wavering beliefs. New nuances are added when not only cultural or ethnic belonging, but also gender itself, come into play. After all, the female migrant is also less constrained by the conventions imposed by the society she originally came from and by the socio-cultural fabric of her destination country. Not by chance, Ōba Minako's female characters are complex, multi-faceted and independent.

It is against the background of these experiences and of the reassessment of the author's relationship with her Japanese culture, that this paper proposes that

Oregon yume jūya (Ten Nights of Oregon's Dreams, 1980) should be read.[1] In this book, written many years after her American experience, Ōba tries her hand at autobiographical writing, which, until the 1920s, was an exclusively male domain for contemplating subjectivity, but autobiography is also the narrative method preferred by the so-called *diaspora* or *migration literature.*

The protagonist—in this phase of the author's life, which could be defined as "post-feminist"—is no longer a woman who suffers, or a woman who loves, but rather a woman who thinks, a rebellious and transgressive woman, who makes no apologies and does not allow herself to be bridled. The emergence of this new model of female subjectivity proves that the theme—and concept—of migrancy implies a creative process for Ōba.

Mapping Gender

Ōba Minako 大庭みな子 (1930–2007) has always been considered a forerunner of Japanese women's writing on migration. In 1959, she left Japan for Alaska, and she spent the next eleven years abroad. This once in-a-lifetime experience, besides providing the settings for many of her novels, introduced her to a fascinating and unknown mythological-cultural heritage. Striving to make the most of this period, she travels at length across the North American continent, attends painting and literature courses at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and at the University of Washington in Seattle. When she returns to Sitka, in Alaska, she starts writing *Sanbiki no kani* 三匹の蟹 (*The three crabs*, 1967), for which she is awarded the first of a series of prestigious literary prizes, spanning a long period of time. This experience is not only the linchpin of her first oeuvres, but, in broader terms, it will be the inspiration for her entire career as an author. Although her novels *Oregon yume jūya*, オレゴン夢十夜 (Ten Nights of Oregon's Dreams, 1980) *Kiri no tabi* (A Journey Through the Mist, 1980), *Umi ni yuragu ito* 海にゆらぐ糸 (A Thread Swaying in the Sea, 1989) were published many years after her American sojourn, they still seem deeply rooted in that borderland, which the author—one perceives—has never completely left behind.

Ōba's writing, in fact, seems to stem from dissolving and overcoming geographical-spatial borders in a sort of transcultural, imagined, continuously reviewed and challenged "third space." Border, edge, passage, threshold, bridge: a place where, according to the *location* theory that was reformulated in the 1990s by Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, women, once they have acquired an outsider's or migrant's perspective and awareness, are able to deconstruct their own culture. This allows them to gain many different perspectives and to "read" both themselves and *others.* Nevertheless, this causes radical problems not only as regards how identity and authenticity are conceived, but also in the definition itself of

[1] All translations, unless otherwise attributed, are mine.

the border/center, identity/difference, *insider/outsider* binary combinations.[2] In this liminal space, defined by critics as *in-between*, the subject is both outside and inside the margins of society. And not only this: by seeing oneself through the eyes of *another person*, one is different from one's real self.[3] Indeed, it is in the transcontinental—trans-Pacific?—travels that we can discern the roots of Ōba's creative career. It is a sort of geographical and literary osmosis combined with a radically critical reconsideration of Japan's cultural and identity-making boundaries.

Women's status as outsider and marginal person opens up a wide range of opportunities, and gives freedom that allows a leeway for independent behaviour and alternative thinking.[4] The cultural identity of the migrant—or the wanderer—is a constant process of construction and deconstruction, as well as being made up of doubts—desperate, yet at the same time, false and wavering beliefs. New nuances are added when not only cultural or ethnic belonging, but also gender itself come into play. Finally, the female migrant is also less constrained by the conventions imposed by the society she originally came from and by the socio-cultural fabric of her destination country.

In other words, this status creates and describes new identities, and *migration* therefore becomes a creative process whereby the experience of displacement is transformed into literature in a sort of liminal, ideal, intercultural—or rather trans-cultural—zone, which is created and positioned within the interval between the author's country of origin and the country of destination. Thus stories take shape, which "are populated by female characters who are borderline as regards different genders, languages, and their forms. In these characters we find graftings and metamorphoses, gender inversions and androgynous figures in a wealth of identities, which are contaminated by the animal, vegetal, and human world."[5] We are confronted by the imagological processes that are under way. These processes unwind through the painful struggle against prejudices and stereotypes, and their critical revision, in a relentless attempt to portray the truth.

Ōba is the protagonist of a migration without constraints, violent rifts, suffering, blood, or exile. Playing on the theme of the shifts in culture, time and space, she deconstructs patterns and stereotypes. The experience of *someone else's* space becomes the tool whereby the author is able to rediscover her own culture and to unveil its ambiguity; at the same time, it allows her to medi(t)ate in an ironical and disenchanted way upon the culture of her home country and therefore to deconstruct and contest its stereotypes, prejudices, and patterns with scathing irony.

A composite and hybrid form of writing emerges from these experiences; the dual experience of the American and Japanese culture certainly adds a critical

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[2] Kaplan and Grewal 1994, pp. 231–54.
[3] Scrolavezza 2010, p. 313.
[4] Valentine 1990, p. 37.
[5] Curti 2006, p. 9.

perspective to her writing which, from a space situated beyond the dichotomy of border/centre, encourages the reader to contemplate on issues such as identity—in national, ethnic and gender terms—and belonging, both of which, in this age of rapid globalization, are increasingly and dramatically defined in terms of ambiguity.[6] In fact, her stories are full of displaced female characters: migrant subjects who are deprived of their linguistic, political, and religious identity, each of them living the laceration of the loss of identity firsthand. However, in this way, these characters find an otherwise impossible space that gives them freedom.

There are many women living across different cultures who are the protagonists of an ethnic, cultural, and identity-making diaspora just as Ōba had experienced as the keystone of her inspiration. As in Lidia Curti's words, those women "have renewed the modalities and language of women's writing [. . .] moving among different languages and cultures, and giving voice to their own bodies—their carnal body and their body of writing."[7]

The Female Autograph

> Well, after twenty years, I want to try and keep a diary. Twenty years ago, I threw the diary, which I had scrupulously kept until that moment, into the sea from a ship. Even now, while it lies at the bottom of the sea, I manage to see the bluish pages rise up in the wind, as if they were dancing. While they were falling into the water, the white pages seemed to glisten, but as they are now wet the ink will be smudged and the characters will have faded.
>
> [. . .]
>
> I haven't written any diaries since then. However, I have started to write novels. The undefined nature of my self, which I had suddenly become aware of, refused that form of writing.
>
> At the moment, I am determined that I will start to keep something that resembles a diary, although I don't think it will last very long. At a certain point, it will probably be transformed into something different.[8]

Ōba Minako chose to write *Oregon yume jūya* in the form of a diary—an unusual diary, in which the rhythmic succession of months and days is further marked by the division into chapters, in actual fact, ten stories—dreams?—linked together by a subtle *fil rouge*. All the stories are told by Ōba, who is the protagonist, the narrator, and the real author, whose attention continuously slips away from the present to her memories of her previous trips, of which there are hints right from the first few pages, in the evocative image of that old diary thrown into the sea from the deck of a ship.

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[6] Hurley 1999, pp. 89–103.
[7] Curti 2006, p. 10.
[8] Ōba Minako 1996, pp. 11–12.

Ever since the 1970s, the kind of autobiographical style adopted by the author in this book has captivated the attention of critics, who have been keen to emphasise the open character of its narrative, a character that eludes any rigid definition in terms of genre by the use of a hybrid linguistic register. Disjointed and caught up in the rhythms of everyday life, diaries are characterised by frequent repetitions and by the complete absence of both retrospective glances and teleological developments. Memoirs, after all, are one of the ways in which literature has always engaged with the uncertain quality of the subject.

The analysis of the complex and multilayered autobiographical prose becomes even more intricate when the notion of *gender* is taken into account. During the 1980s, feminist critics rejected the idea that an essentialist notion of the *self* is sufficient to describe the narrative techniques of subjects who must fight to affirm their own voices. The first critic to point out that there was a need to study autobiographical writing from a feminist perspective was Estelle Jelinek in the late 1970s. Jelinek argued that in order to affirm her subjectivity by writing in the first person, and to express her desire for independence, a woman had to challenge the system of control established by the patriarchal scheme over the course of the centuries. Despite this *modus operandi*, there have always been women who were able to cross the line between private and public discourse, women who have chosen to tell their own stories, fully aware of their own marginal position with respect to the centre where discourse originates.[9]

One of the most interesting and fruitful aspects of the critical analysis proposed by Jelinek, taken up again in recent years by Domna Stanton but also by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, is the definition of *experience* as the basis of female identity, and the consequent contrast between male autobiography, based on a coherent and harmonious plan, and the fragmentary, discontinuous and elusive nature of female autobiographical writing. This is a form of writing that reflects the experience of a multi-faceted, complex, a-centric, changeable individual, a person who becomes the point of convergence of a complex network of categories and/or multiple differences within every woman.[10] In this way, the body becomes the place of differences between culturally defined and ethnically as well as racially specified historicized subjects rather than representing the differences between men and women. These characteristics are dramatically outlined in the pages of the so-called migration literature, due to its very nature, as it focuses on the complex relationship with *the other*, or—as in our case—with *the other woman*.[11]

Displaced Subjects

In its first wave, all migration literature is always dominated by the autobiographical mode; such authors hold and convey the experience of someone who lived the first

[9] Jelinek 1980.

[10] Smith and Watson 2002.

[11] See Curti 2006, pp. 9–12, for a discussion of female marginality and otherness.

part of his/her life elsewhere, still reliving it in memory.[12] The various stages of the journey towards the destination are narrated, the ordeal of finding one's bearings and settling into a new situation, the contacts with the new citizens, the nostalgia, the difficulty of adapting to the language: all these themes and motifs can be found in the first pages of *Oregon yume jūya*, in the chapter that is, not by chance, entitled *Tanin no heya* 他人の部屋 (The rooms of the other woman). Here the focus is no longer the uniqueness of a situation that is known both in geographical and temporal terms, but on reviving certain memories, and the trip seems to multiply like the reflection of an image in a play of mirrors, to become a symbol of an existential condition.

Ōba's novel could be read as a constant contemplation on the meaning of concepts such as *home, exile, belonging, identity*; here the very dream that appears in the title, as in *Samete miru yume* 醒めて見る夢 (Daydream, 1978), becomes a strong metaphor to define the condition of those who wander outside their home country, in search of a new personal dimension, in a liminal space that transcends any idea of a nation. Like the fog in *Sanbiki no kani*, dreams symbolize an *in-between*, a trans-national and trans-cultural space in which the subject can observe with detached disenchantment the values of her own theoretical society or country. The wanderer can deconstruct them and replace them with others, which are formulated through her memory, free association, and imagination.

Ōba's characters often come from an undefined, fluid and chaotic context, from which they manage to shape identities, personalities and a new system of values. This makes them free to float in a world that responds to cultural influences, but which is not fossilized by rigid social and linguistic rules. The author constantly comes back to this concept. In her stories, the most authentic form of communication usually occurs in a world on the fringe between reality and fantasy. For example, in the short story *Salmonberry Bay* サーモンベリイ・ベイ (Salmonberry Bay, 1986), where the three protagonists Nina, Olga and Yuri—respectively, two Russian emigrant women and a Japanese emigrant woman—when they are together, feel as if they have been transformed into swans, and they experience the strange feeling of saying new words. And they laugh, unable to understand if these words belong to the human or the swan world.[13]

In Ōba's world, the very concept of a nation, and therefore of a national belonging, separates woman from nature and makes her perennially an *émigrée* and foreigner, even in her own land. The author's birthplace itself seems to conjure up antithetical feelings: in some of Ōba's works it represents the place to flee from because it is too constrained by the dominant language of a patriarchal society and codified culture which attempt to colonize the individual subjectivity, especially in the case of the feminine point of view, commonly perceived as rather marginal. Yuri, the female protagonist of *Sanbiki no kani*, experiences a profound sense of discomfiture in the total and painful lack of communication that prevails

[12] Nisci 2003.
[13] Ōba 1993, p. 39.

both within and outside the family, in the area of social relations. And she ends up somatizing her malaise and expressing it through her silence. *Yamanba no bishō* 山姥の微笑 (The Yamamba's Final Smile, 1976) describes a woman who has no other option but to take sanctuary in her imagination, far from the pressures and rituals of society; even though there are times when, reading the thoughts of men, she would like to devour them, she suppresses the destructive instinct and abandons herself to the utopia of a rediscovered freedom in the mountains—another liminal space, which is mythicized and irremediably lost. This also occurs to Yukie, the protagonist of *Urashimasō* 浦島草 (Urashima Plant, 1977), who, after returning to Japan after a long absence, finds that she is an *émigré* in her country of origin.

Certainly, the cosmopolitan atmosphere that can be breathed in Ōba's works depends to a great extent on her first lengthy experience abroad. Her separation, not without resentment, from the rigid Japanese society allows her to feel free and to express herself, and to find the voice which, until that moment, she had suffocated. The experience of being in exile is translated into the discovery—or perhaps we should say the *construction*—of an *in-between* space between the reality of the host country and that of the country of origin; it is the third-space within which Ōba can finally become aware of herself, as a woman in Japan and as a migrant outside Japan. And as a writer. The *in-between* becomes a space from which an unreal and imaginary dimension originates, which in essence is the result of migration.[14]

Therefore, living in exile can also be interpreted as a privileged way of seeing everything in perspective, of immerging oneself in a new reality and measuring oneself with it, and with one's life experiences without prejudices. The figure that emerges in *Oregon yume jūya*, many years after Ōba's first American experience, is an intelligent, thinking, unique and unbridled woman. The author, having overcome or perhaps acknowledged the potential of the undefined character of her own self, decides to turn her hand to autobiographical writing.

> In Minako's decentered and unstable world, which is in continual flux, the two polarities we perceive through our cultural conditioning as male and female seem to disintegrate and the traditional dichotomy of femininity (*yin*) versus masculinity (*yang*) loses its significance.[15]

The Woman Diarist

By choosing to write in the first person in Japan, every woman writing inevitably reveals her somewhat transgressive yearning for cultural and literary authority. In fact, this choice implies a comparison between the rules of a genre—*shishōsetsu*—modelled on the male *I*, and the difficult relationship that exists between herself, as a woman, and language, power, and meaning.

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[14] Yamade 2002, pp.127–29.

[15] Wilson 1999, p. 159.

The term *shishōsetsu* was coined at the beginning of the 1920s to define a type of novel which started to be developed at the end of the Meiji era, focused on the author's inner self. It was Uno Kōji 宇野浩二 who first used the term *watakushi shōsetsu*, "I-novel," to translate the German *Ich-Roman*, with the intent of distinguishing his literary style from that whose narrators express their thoughts without providing personal details on their own lives. A few years later, thanks to the activity of influential critics such as Nakamura Mitsuo 中村光男, Kobayashi Hideo 小林秀雄 and Kume Masao 久米正雄, *shishōsetsu* became the only possible form of pure literature: in the 1930s, the I-novel was the central focus of the contemporary literary canon.[16]

Since the 1920s, women had started to write in a confessional style, however, their contribution to its dissemination and development as a literary genre is disregarded: their works are never defined as *shishōsetsu*, but rather as *jiden shōsetsu*, that is a sort of "autobiographical novel." The boundaries of women's literature are therefore set on the basis of two antinomic pairs of conceptual categories, pure/mass literature, and *shishōsetsu/jidenshōsetsu*. Such antinomies represent imperfect oppositions, which often allowed exceptions, but, in most cases, they achieved the aim of heavily penalizing women's writing, which was considered popularly trivial and aesthetically inferior.[17] Moreover in *shishōsetsu*, contents often develop around a female character, who is portrayed just as the protagonist's object of mere desire. On the contrary, the woman who chooses to write in the first person asks to be acknowledged by the *establishment* deciding to be either the subject or the object of the story. Thus she ends up finding herself in the peculiar situation of those who write from within—and against—the genres which follow precise rules even for the portrayal of the female subject/object. She therefore defies both the norm of *gender* and that of *genre*.

Ōba's writing does not revolve around a *heroic* or public life, but around a flowing, multifarious experience ruled by contingency. Bound to a world that denies women the status of subjects and producers of culture, and that defines womanhood as the object of desire and sexuality, woman is determined to gain control over her own body, and over language in order to affirm her own identity. And the tool that allows her to achieve her objective is the transformation of her migration experience into an existential condition. That *in-between* state, which initially coincides with the geographic space of Alaska—a liminal/border place *par excellence* with a potentially hybrid territorial, ethnic, or national identity—becomes an interior place from which Ōba will never stray again. It becomes a melting pot for her inspiration, and a setting and backdrop to her writing—to such an extent, in fact, that in *Oregon yume jūya* the *in-between* state actually shapes the structure of the book.

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[16] See Suzuki 1996 for a discussion of the critical notion of *shishōsetsu*.

[17] See Ericson 1996, pp. 74–115 for a discussion of the origins of the concept of *joryūbungaku*.

From her debut as a writer, Ōba distinguishes herself through her original poetic style: at the start of her career, she tries her hand at poetry with the collection *Sabita kotoba* 錆びた言葉 (Rusty words, 1971), but the core of her literary works is composed of prose. Notwithstanding her choice of form, prose and poetry continue to coexist in her writings. Her stories are imbued with lyricism and they come to life thanks to the free association of events, images, scenes and memories. The lyrical tone of her prose does not foresee a central event or search for a formal coherence. As in the literary tradition of the Heian period, her works are open, fluid, determined by the fortuitous occurrence of events and reminiscences. Her writing is focused on the senses, which implies a complicity between the reader and the writer, a tacit and implicit agreement whereby what is implied has a more profound meaning, while what is invisible, indefinite, and ambiguous enhances and intensifies the emotional message of the story. Reading one of Ōba's stories means exposing oneself to continuous sensorial and intellectual provocations; nothing is what it seems, and the only form of knowledge is the instinctive perception of all the stimuli: that is, visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile, and taste sensations. As the protagonist of the short story *Salmonberry Bay*, quoted above, says:

> The taste and the aroma of food, like a musical scale, encompasses assonances and dissonances whose harmonization does not occur through a logical process, but in a completely intuitive manner.[18]

Ōba's works reveal elements of formal convergence between the literary genres of the *shōsetsu* and of the *shishōsetsu*, but they differ from these two forms in many aspects: Ōba uses and abuses their lyrical structure in a sophisticated and ironical way. As Michiko Niikuni Wilson points out:

> In Minako's hands, the lyrical mode of the *shōsetsu* as we have known it has been revitalized and transformed into something the Japanese modern literary canon had not thought possible.[19]

In *Oregon yume jūya*, Ōba plays with the diary format: she does so not only with subtle irony from the very first pages, in which she shows that she doubts her own ability to remain faithful to a structure that she had already refused at the moment she started writing novels, but, in addition, as we have underlined above, she does not hesitate to break the rhythm of the diary by dividing it into chapters. In fact, about this text we can say what many years later the author wrote about *Umi ni yuragu ito*:

> This work, written over the course of two years, can be compared to a collection of *tanpen shōsetsu*, but, as in many oeuvres that I have written during my life, you can read them separately in their individual parts, or as

[18] Ōba 1993, p. 48.
[19] Wilson 1999, pp. 37–38.

> if everything were held together by a fine string, which floats on the surface of the sea.[20]

There are no numbered chapters in these two works, but each of them has its own title, perhaps in order to stress its narrative autonomy.

Ultimately, the text's distinctive feature is its fluidity: in the multiplication and proliferation of its references and models, it slips easily from the prose of its daily entries to scraps of conversation, menus, shopping lists, and so on. True only to its inter-generic status, the only constant factor is its diary form. Long relegated to a marginal position with respect to the regular autobiographic genre, the diary form has recently been rediscovered because of the special relations created between the private sphere and the domain of creative literature. Halfway between being public and private, between the interior and the exterior worlds, the diary is, on the one hand, an instrument for introspection and, on the other, an artifice. Historically, it has been a mode of self-representation much preferred by women, who have confided the account of their existential lives to the diary, making it the place where they build their own identities. A faithful record of the succession of daily events, and therefore fragmentary and discontinued narration, it is an accomplice to the ephemeral character of experience—the same of which Jelinek spoke.

> In any literary work, the writer or artist can have everything in mind except the reader, and its departure point, both implicitly and explicitly, is always one's 'self'.[21]

Ōba's writing typically alternates between facts, descriptions and digressions, which do not follow a logical-temporal succession, but rather cohere with the skilful evocation and association of memories and feelings. In *Oregon yume jūya*, the narrative continuously confuses the present with the memory of landscapes, faces, voices belonging to previous sojourns in the United States.

A female subject whom we can only define as being *free* emerges from this hybrid writing: a woman who, with lucid detachment, contemplates either the society of her country of origin or that of her host country. On the eve of her departure to Oregon, the protagonist cannot shun the rituals of greetings of friends and acquaintances:

> "Abandoning your husband for three months!" "What will he do while you're gone?" "He'll be so lonely." All sorts of people fired questions at me, things that I found totally meaningless. How did I reply? "He's used to it." "What do you mean by 'What will he do all alone?' He's no child. He'll manage by himself, I'm sure. You can't be serious. Would you put the same question to a wife when her husband stays away from home for a long time?"[22]

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[20] Ōba 1993, pp. 266–69.
[21] Ōba 1992, pp.185–87
[22] Ōba 1996, p. 10. (Quoted in Wilson 1999, p. 67).

A provocative and iconoclast writer in the first few pages of the book, Ōba turns the tide of gender roles, through a careful yet rapid analysis of social and marital relations from the perspective of a female character. Among the many works whose protagonists seem to be overcome by the prevailing patriarchal system or those who present sacrificing one's existence and taking refuge in some *other* dimension as the only solution, *Oregon yume jūya* represents an important stage in the development of gender issues, above all as regards relations between men and women.

Almost fifteen years after the publication of *Sanbiki no kani*, many social changes have occurred, and literature reflects them. While in the story, which drew the attention of the public and literary critics to the author, the protagonist Yuri brings with her a way of being based on appearance and superficiality, which seems to condemn her to solitude and dissatisfaction, without providing any way out, the relationship between the couple outlined in *Tanin no heya* seems to represent the achievement of a sort of inner peace of mind, an attempt to reconcile individual needs with a balanced family life. Ōba depicts a union between man and woman that defies the clichés and hypocrisy: the couple's life acquires the connotation of a free cohabitation between partners, who live and think without fear of being misunderstood.

In other words, once the process of deconstruction has been completed, the author strongly portrays what women want to be. Her later works seem to augur new possibilities of defining female identity within society and specifically in the institution of marriage. The protagonist—in this phase which could be defined as "post-feminist"—is no longer a woman who suffers nor a woman who loves, but a woman who thinks: a rebellious and transgressive woman who makes no apologies and does not allow herself to be bridled and silenced. This is a new model of female subjectivity that, as we have seen, stems from the experience of migration, and that here conveys all its creative potential.

In defining a recognizable model of what feminism is at the end of the century, Rosi Braidotti refers to the metaphor of the *nomad*: a transgressive identity whose transitory nature obliges him/her to not remain in one place, but to move on, and therefore to make contact with other people, form relationships and coalitions. This could well define the protagonist of *Oregon yume jūya*.

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