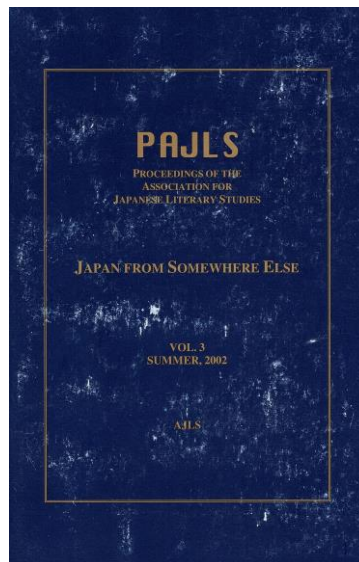


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*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese  
Literary Studies* 3 (2002): 12–22.



*PAJLS* 3:  
*Japan From Somewhere Else*.  
Eiji Sekine, Editor; Joyce L. Detzner, Production Editor.

## WHERE IS MY HOME: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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In the era of globalization, quite a few bicultural Japanese women writers have come to prominence in the Japanese literary world, among them Minako Oba, Fumiko Kometani, Yoko Tawada, Kyoko Mori, and Minae Mizumura. Although they employ diverse literary forms for self-expression, they seem to have a common theme, that is, a search for individual identity as well as cultural identity.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how essential the choice of language is for a bicultural writer to describe her life in two cultures and to write about the search for her double-layered identity. For this purpose, two bicultural Japanese women writers' autobiographical novels will be examined. One is Fumiko Kometani's *Passover (Sugikoshi no matusuri)* and the other is Minae Mizumura's *I-novel from Left to Right (Shishōsetsu from left to right)*.

Weaving the stories of present and past, both authors write about their journeys of finding their identities and their 'homes' between two cultures. This theme is quite often explored in bicultural writers' works, since generally speaking, bicultural writers feel themselves alienated, insecure, and void.<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Yakelevich's discussion on "Search for Community" is indicative of a bicultural individual's inner thoughts:

The idea of community evokes in the individual the feeling that: "Here is where I belong, these are my people, I care for them, they care for me, I am part of them...." This is a *powerful emotion*...Its [community feeling] absence is experienced as an aching loss, a void....symptomized by *feelings of isolation, falseness, instability and impoverishment of spirit*.<sup>2</sup> (Italics mine)

Bicultural writers' experiences of living in double cultures arouse "feelings of isolation, falseness, instability and impoverishment of spirit" in their minds, since most of bicultural writers lack "a powerful emotion" of belonging to one community, one nation and one culture. They frequently feel uprooted from both cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Kyoko Mori's *The Dream of Water: a Memoir* deals with this theme.

<sup>2</sup> Yakelevich, 227.

Similarly, both Kometani and Mizumura unfold their own stories, with a sense of displacement, a sense of alienation, belonging nowhere or anywhere. Although both writers have similar themes in their works, they employ different linguistic styles. Kometani selects Japanese to write her autobiographical work, mixing Osaka dialect and standard Japanese. On the other hand, Mizumura's choice of the medium to interpret her life is a linguistic blend of Japanese and English. As Paul John Eakin remarks,

“Language remains inescapably central as the medium in which inner states are culturally negotiated and expressed.”<sup>3</sup>

Both bicultural authors tell their stories of the journey toward self-discovery with their unique linguistic styles. Language is a powerful instrument to depict the self, as Eakin remarks:

Language is not a mode of privation but an instrument of possibility and power to be placed at the service of self-definition. The self as we know it in autobiography does come into being through language.<sup>4</sup>

Choice of language is essential, especially for bicultural writers, to describe the process of their self-awareness, since language is “an instrument of possibility and power” for the writings of “self-definition.” Now each work will be examined with focus on the reason and the effect of their linguistic choice. First, Kometani's *Passover* will be explored.

#### **FUMIKO KOMETANI'S *PASSOVER***

Fumiko Kometani was born in Osaka, Japan, in 1930. She came to America to study painting in 1960. She is the wife of Jewish American writer Josh Greenfeld. They have a son who is mentally handicapped.<sup>5</sup>

Kometani's novella *Passover* won the Akutagawa Prize for new writers in 1986. It is the story of the international marriage, in other words, the story of the clash of two different cultures, two different roots. The heroine of this book, Michiko (Kometani's alter-ego), her husband, Al, and their older son, Jon go to New York for an one-week-vacation. Their younger brain damaged son, Ken, is now institutionalized. For the first time in

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<sup>3</sup> Eakin, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>5</sup> Josh Greenfeld has written several books about life with their retarded son, Noah.

thirteen years, Michiko is free from the physically and mentally exhausting care of her younger son. She expects to have a good time in New York, looking forward to seeing her old friends and to visiting museums. However, her expectation is miserably shattered. Michiko finds herself sitting resentfully and gloomily at the table of the Passover Seder, surrounded by her husband's family. Kometani effectively uses fragmented, non-chronological flashbacks to connect her present and her past, and to describe her struggling life between two cultures. Another effective literary technique is her linguistic choice. She writes her autobiographical novel blending Osaka dialect and standard Japanese. Two reasons for this linguistic amalgam can be pointed out. First, she uses this linguistic blend to clarify the literary line between the 'self' and the 'others.' As her birthplace and home until adulthood, Osaka is the place of her self-formation. Its language, Osaka dialect, may embody her identity. As Anya Peterson Royce remarks:

Language is frequently the focus of identification. It is readily apparent when two groups do not have a common language; language difference is usually one of the first markers of different identities.<sup>6</sup>

Kometani utilizes languages as "the first markers of different identities." It is natural for Kometani to use the Osaka dialect for describing her thoughts and recording/translating her own conversations. On the other hand, she employs standard Japanese to record the dialogues of American characters. The following quotation from *Passover* exemplifies this linguistic device. Kometani writes down in standard Japanese what Sylvia (Kometani's sister-in-law) says, while Kometani's thoughts are expressed in Osaka dialect. Kometani hates her sister-in-law. Now Sylvia talks about her vacation in Sweden:

The nights were white, you know, I couldn't sleep. I became so tired. But I did buy a baby seal overcoat. I'll show it to you the next time I visit.

*If you bring that coat I will be so nervous. I can just see Ken smearing ice cream and rice and mashed potatoes all over it. Don't you realize what would happen? Anyway, how dare you wear such a coat? A baby animal had to be killed so it could be*

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<sup>6</sup> Royce, 149.

*made. How insensitive can you be? What kind of nerve do you have?*<sup>7</sup>

Thus Kometani effectively uses Osaka dialect and standard Japanese to differentiate the ‘self’ and the ‘others.’

The second reason for her linguistic choice is to distance herself from her harsh reality. Kometani’s witty and humorous use of Osaka dialect is helpful to prevent self-indulgent pathos. Laughing at the serious and bitter reality enables her to have an objective perception of her life itself. In her autobiographical work *Passover*, through the first-person narrator, Michiko, Kometani reveals her domestic difficulties and her personal frustrations. Michiko gave up her dream to become an artist a long time ago because she had battled for and with her now-institutionalized mentally handicapped son for thirteen years. She has been striving to get along with her short tempered Jewish-American husband and her cold-hearted and selfish sister-in-law. Michiko has been frustrated, realizing the gap between her dream and her reality.

Twenty years ago, like Kometani, Michiko came to America, full of hope, for the study of painting. She fervently dreamed, “One day I would have one-man - or rather one-woman-shows of my own in similar galleries [to those which she visited in New York twenty years earlier].”<sup>8</sup> Before she came to the U.S.A., she fantasized America as the land of dreams and freedom. Kometani, through the voice of Michiko, writes in retrospect:

Just after the war, in the new American Pharmacy on Toa Road in Kobe, I smelled a fragrance, one that I had never smelled before. It did not come from any one item, but was everywhere in the store. I decided that must be the aroma of America, and it became the symbol of freedom for me.<sup>9</sup>

She recalls the day when she arrived in America in 1960. She still cherished her dreams and hope:

There was freedom in America. I could do whatever I wanted to do. I had finally made the great leap out of Japan, where

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<sup>7</sup> I quote Kometani’s translation of *Passover*. Kometani herself translated it into English for English-speaking readers. She uses italics for the passages originally written in Osaka dialect. Kometani, 1989, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 19.

convention reigned and all men had much more power than any woman. I could live the romantic life of my dreams, one dedicated purely to art and its values.<sup>10</sup>

Twenty years passed since then. Michiko's dream of having a one-woman-show in a gallery is shattered and she comes to realize that America does not necessarily give freedom to a woman. Michiko has been entangled and bound by her husband and his family. Kometani illustrates her sense of entrapment:

In one way or another, I had to get away from this family. Otherwise, my whole life would end up in bondage and servitude. The powerful hands I used to paint with had better things to do than just take care of other people.<sup>11</sup>

To write the story of such a frustrated and entangled life in America, detached and objective description is essential. Otherwise, Kometani's autobiographical novel would become a cheap emotional story about family matters. Her use of witty and humorous Osaka dialect saves her work from this literary disaster. Writer, Tsutomu Minakami highly values Kometani's employment of Osaka dialect in *Passover*. He comments that Kometani's use of Osaka dialect produces a sophisticated sense of humor and because of this, her work is refreshing.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the story, when Michiko walks out on the Passover Seder, freeing herself from the entanglement with her husband's family, Manhattan again seems to her "the island of hope" as it was twenty years ago. Symbolically, she smells "the fragrance of American Pharmacy"<sup>13</sup> emanating from somewhere.

Kometani's *Passover* is the story of deconstructing a 'public' identity and reconstructing a 'private' identity. According to Madan Sarup, the former is "how 'others' have typified us," and the latter is "how we see ourselves."<sup>14</sup>

Michiko realizes that, deep in his heart, Al, her husband, never really knows who she is. He must assume that she fits into the usual generalization, since she is Japanese. Kometani explains her 'public'

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>12</sup> Minakami in Bungeishunjū, March, 1986. Translation is mine.

<sup>13</sup> Kometani, 1989, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Sarup, 14.

identity as “I would be subservient to him [her husband]” and “I would be obedient to his family.”<sup>15</sup>

She defies her ‘public’ identity, by escaping from the Passover Seder. Kometani proudly defines her ‘private’ identity as “an independent woman.” She declares:

Any woman who crossed the wide ocean in a small freighter to come to America, no matter what her nationality or race, was an independent woman. And an independent woman could not blindly obey other people forever.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in *Passover* Kometani interweaves the multiple threads of themes; the clash of two different cultures/roots, the loss of dream and the recovery of hope, and deconstructing her ‘public’ identity and reconstructing her ‘private’ identity. Her linguistic choice, mixing Osaka dialect and standard Japanese, intensifies the thematic contrast in her literary tapestry.

Now, let me examine how and why the other bicultural writer Minae Mizumura does choose her linguistic style for her *shishōsetsu*,

#### **MINAE MIZUMURA’S *SHISHŌSETSU FROM LEFT TO RIGHT***

Mizumura came to America at the age of twelve because her father was transferred from Tokyo to New York. *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is the story which tells how Minae (Mizumura’s alter-ego) comes to decide to go back to Japan after “twenty years of the Exodus,”<sup>17</sup> with the hope of becoming a Japanese writer. This book won the Noma Literary Prize for New Writers in 1995.

In her *shishōsetsu*,<sup>18</sup> Mizumura describes her hovering self between two cultures, her struggle in the gap between her dream and her reality, and the psychological process toward her decision to go back to Japan after twenty-year-residence in America. Like Kometani, Mizumura exposes her family disruption in her autobiographical work. Minae’s mother has gone to Singapore to live with her lover, abandoning her husband in a nursing home. He is now blind and bed-ridden because of his diabetes. As a result of her

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<sup>15</sup> Kometani, 1989, 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Mizumura, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Tomi Suzuki defines, “*Shishōsetsu* generally designates an autobiographical narratives in which the author is thought to recount faithfully the details of his or her personal life in a thin guise of fiction” (1).

mother's elopement, Minae and her sister Nanae are also left alone in America with no 'home' to go back.

Like Kometani, Mizumura interweaves disconnected flashbacks with self-sustained units in which the present moment is described. Mizumura also selects linguistic amalgam as the medium to describe her divided life between two cultures. Traditionally, almost all Japanese literary works have been written vertically from top to bottom. However, Mizumura's *Shishōsetsu from left to right* breaks this long literary tradition. As the title indicates, Mizumura writes her book horizontally from left to right. This writing style is more convenient for Mizumura than the traditional one, since she blends Japanese and English. As a bilingual and bicultural, she is able to appreciate the uniqueness of each language. She knows that what is said in one language cannot be said in another language. Realizing the characteristics of each language, she keeps dialogues in their original languages, writing scenes with Japanese in Japanese, scenes with Americans in English, and scenes with her older sister, Nanae, in the mixture of English and Japanese.

Unlike Kometani, Mizumura did not come to the United States with her own will. She describes her move to America with some resentment, saying "My sister and I could not accept America like my parents, because we were uprooted and transplanted while still growing."<sup>19</sup> Mizumura uses the image of plant to illustrate her confusion, covertly revealing her fear of being rootless. Her confusion is accelerated when she is forced to learn and to speak English. When English is "like bird's chirping"<sup>20</sup> to her, Minae painfully realizes that she is placed at the bottom of the American intellectual hierarchy in which, generally speaking, verbal ability is a determinant factor. She is not considered 'a smart girl' (*orikō na ko*) any more in America. Maxine Hong Kingston, in her autobiographical novel, presents the similar experience, in her case, as an immigrant daughter. Kingston remarks with some sadness, "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality."<sup>21</sup> Minae shares the same distressed feeling with Kingston. When English does not make any sense to her, Minae writes Japanese in her

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<sup>19</sup> Mizumura, 46. Translation is mine.

<sup>20</sup> Mizumura, 96. Eva Hoffman, in her *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, presents the similar problems with the English language. She remarks: 'the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue [Polish].' Hoffman, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Kingston, 210.



notebook in a classroom at a junior high school (in “the world of alphabet”). She explains why she spends her time in writing Japanese in the class:

When I am writing kanji and hiragana, I feel as if I would transform from the miserable and inferior existence into the brilliant one who knows the world of a different culture which any other language cannot replace.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese language is like a magic wand for Minae to transform herself from her “public” identity into her “private” identity. By a wave of the linguistic magic wand, she feels as if she could become a “smart girl” again in “the world of alphabet.”

To escape from the reality in the United States and to recover “personality,” Minae shuts herself up in her room, reading Japanese novels, especially those written by authors of *Nihon Kindai Bungaku* (Modern Japanese Literature) such as Natsume Sōseki and Higuchi Ichiyō. Minae realizes that she feels *shifuku* (happy) only when she reads Japanese novels. Sarup’s explanation on the migrant’s psychology helps us to understand this Minae’s self-observation. Sarup remarks:

Some people don’t feel at home where they are; they are unhappy and they look back. Millions of people in the world today are searching for ‘roots’....They try and learn something of that culture, that history. These are the people who in some way have found it difficult ‘to form roots’, to become firmly established. By learning about their ‘roots’, they (hope to) gain a renewed pride in their identity.<sup>23</sup>

It seems that Minae tries to find her ‘root’ or imaginary ‘home’ in *Nihon Kindai Bungaku*. Therefore, she feels happy only when she devotes herself in reading Japanese novels. On the other hand, Minae feels *fukō* (unhappy) when she has to live in “the world of alphabet.”

When she is separated from her mother tongue, she becomes aware of its beauty and characteristics. Eakin observes similar process as hers. He asserts, “It is the very separation from one’s language and culture of origin that enables one to achieve an understanding of its distinctiveness.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Mizumura, 287.

<sup>23</sup> Sarup, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Eakin, 121.

With an understanding of the distinctiveness of each language, Mizumura cannot use Japanese to record the dialogues of English and vice versa. She does not “transplant” a language into a different “soil.”

Like Michiko in *Passover*, Minae firmly keeps her cultural identity as a Japanese. Her strong fondness of Japanese language and literature save her from being rootless. To her, reading, speaking and writing Japanese is the solid evidence of being a Japanese. She says, “I am able to expose my true self only when I speak in Japanese.”<sup>25</sup> Minae feels that the English-speaking ‘I’ is not her real self. During her twenty-year-residence in America, she has been longing to go back to Japan. Minae states:

I love Japan, Japanese food, Japanese people, Japanese language and Japanese literature. For such a long time, I have been longing to go back to Japan where there are full of my favorite things. I have been fantasizing that when I go back to Japan, I would start living a new life full of joy and happiness. Oh, but how many years have I been away from Japan already.<sup>26</sup>

Japanese language and literature link her with Japan, even though she is far away from Japan. In order to live in America with a sense of alienation, a sense of displacement, and inferiority complex, Minae has to keep her identity as a Japanese through the language.

On the other hand, her detachment from the English language and America is accelerated by this strong attachment for the Japanese language and Japan. The following anecdote indicates her psychological distance from English and America. When Minae is drawing a picture in her study hour at high school, her English teacher comes and says to her, “You know, you should be working on your English.”<sup>27</sup> Hearing this reproachful comment, she stares back at him with a fierce repulsion. Her angry inner voice says, “I am a Japanese, and will go back to Japan eventually. So is it none of his business, [whether I should study English or not]?”<sup>28</sup> With this strong resistance against English, Minae goes deeper into the world of Japanese literature. She develops her own image of Japan through reading. Her Japan is the one depicted in the novels of *Nihon Kindai Bungaku*. After the first trip to Japan at the age of twenty, Minae has several chances to go back there. Through these trips back to Japan, she comes to realize the gap between real Japan and her fantasized Japan. Therefore, “To return, or not

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<sup>25</sup> Mizumura, 163.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

to return” becomes a big question to her. However, her strong desire to become a Japanese writer such as Sōseki gives a solution to this question.<sup>29</sup>

*Shishōsetsu from left to right* is the story of constructing a new identity between two cultures. In her *shishōsetsu*, Mizumura describes her journey of “twenty years of the Exodus” toward becoming a Japanese writer. Mizumura’s *shishōsetsu* makes it clear that Sarup’s idea about identity is right. Sarup remarks, “[I]dentity is changed by the journey; our subjectivity is recomposed....identity is to do not with being but with becoming.”<sup>30</sup>

Who am I? Where is my “home”? To answer these questions, both bicultural writers, Kometani and Mizumura have to deal with several binaries: a “now” and a “then”, a “here” and a “there”, and “I” and “others.” Their choices of languages become effective literary instrument in their effort to handle this literary complication. Furthermore, choice of language itself is indicative of each writer’s identity. Since the choice of language in itself communicates beyond what is said, linguistic choice and style becomes crucial for a bicultural writer’s autobiographical novel to depict a divided life, individual development and self-awareness.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>29</sup> Actually, Mizumura published *Zoku meian* in 1990. This is the continuation of Sōseki’s incomplete *Meian*.

<sup>30</sup> Sarup, 7.

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