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Le corps dans les littératures modernes d'Asie orientale : discours, représentation, intermédialité

Representations of Bodies in Crisis in Contemporary Japanese Literature: Two Cases of Eating Disorders

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Introduction

- 1 We are all hungry for stories. We stay up late to devour books and gobble up narratives that sate our yearning to understand the human condition; or simply: who we are. We pride ourselves on having sophisticated taste in literature; we spurn junk novels like junk food even though some highbrow literature might be hard to digest. We are hungry for stories because “literature teaches us to notice”,¹ as Wood puts it, literature “makes us better noticers of life”.² Or as Wellberry argues:

[Literature] is a unique form of the articulation of our self-understanding. [...] What kind of knowledge is there that we have by virtue of the fact, not that we know that x or y, but that we know that we have experienced x or y? There is a way in which literary knowledge is the knowledge that we gain for having gone through something in a particular way.³

- 2 Therefore, we can understand literature as a means to teach us what it feels like to go through a certain experience – it allows us to see the world from another point of view. This doesn’t have to be a point of view we necessarily identify or sympathize with – it would be utterly boring to only read books about characters we like – but it might give us a glimpse into what it means to be another person. It helps us to “acquire experience by proxy”.⁴ Art and especially literature teach us to put “ourselves in others’ shoes”.⁵
- 3 In terms of illness experiences I want to argue that literature gives us an understanding of what it means to live with an illness. It shows us the inner perspectives of living with illness without providing a universal understanding of it. Instead, it offers a look into a subjective experience. The portrayal of illness changes from an abstract description of

symptoms in a medical textbook to the feeling of really getting to know someone who suffers from this illness and what it might feel like to be this person. We put ourselves in their shoes – or better: in their bodies.

On writing, reading, and eating

- 4 Unfortunately, “writing the body” presents a dilemma, a paradox, because we have to put a physical *thing* into words. We cannot see, feel, smell or taste bodies in literature. The body can only be *represented* through language. We won’t feel a protagonist’s pain by reading about them. We can never know what it really feels like to have, for example, an eating disorder – unless we experience it ourselves. We won’t mistake these bodies for our own bodies but stories can bring to mind what a reality might look like in which starvation changes the way we feel, act, and think.
- 5 The phrase “to devour a book” signifies more than simple consumption, it implies great hunger, voracious lust or passion and the complete absorption of something from the outside into us. Just as Adam and Eve taste from the tree of knowledge and Ezekiel and John “literally eat manuscripts during divine visions”,⁶ we often think of knowledge and words in bodily metaphors, as something that can be incorporated into ourselves by eating. Yet we tend to understand food as something that feeds our stomach, the physical body, while knowledge, words or literature feed the mind, following the Cartesian dualism and overlooking how eating is always deeply connected to our identities. Food creates and sustains our body. Without food there is no body, without a body there is no need for food. Thus, *everybody* must be an eating body and by eating other bodies, you can remain *somebody*. “Eating is a means of becoming”.⁷ It “entails consuming, internalizing, incorporating, [...] processing, building, strengthening, corroding, overcoming, and externalizing (excreting)”.⁸ Therefore, eating makes up our identity just as much as it makes up our bodies. In her famous essay *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf writes:
- The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.⁹
- 6 And Xu argues in *Eating Identities*:
- Turning inward into our multiple and sometimes competing selves, we understand that we eat (live on) our identities, for they actualize and sustain our selves. There would not be any self-recognition without the multiple identities we assume. Identities are to our social being what food is to our body. Without them, we do not exist. As much as we eat identities, identities also eat us. Constructing and maintaining our identities, be they real or fake, consumes us, cuts us up as teeth cut food to be socially processed and metabolized. [...] Coming into the self through language eats us up, because speaking and writing compete with eating.¹⁰
- 7 She is referring to Deleuze and Guattari, who, in their famous essay on Kafka, argue that language itself already implies a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth, since they “find their primitive territoriality in food”.¹¹ They see “a certain disjunction between eating and speaking, and even more [...] between eating and writing”.¹² They think of writing as an act that can transform words into things capable of competing with food. For them, “to speak, and above all to write, is to fast”.¹³ Words take up the place of food, invading our mouth and our whole body, “[l]anguage,

symbolic of all norms, [also] initiates us into the social, and by doing so, it regulates our eating”, by writing, we make up norms, rules, laws and codes that keep us from eating, that control our appetite and consume our identities just as much as we consume the food that makes up our identities.¹⁴ But what happens when our hunger for stories turns to stories about hunger? When hunger itself and the absence or the refusal of food become the subject of a story? If eating is a means of becoming, is not eating a means of “un-becoming”? I will show how the representation of bodies in crisis in two contemporary Japanese novels also become representations of identities in crisis. Eating disorders cannot only be read as re-negotiations of body boundaries but at the same time as re-negotiations of boundaries of identity, gender, and language. By using aesthetic strategies, they can act as a disturbing impulse, forcing us to experience crises by proxy, and they can help us understand what it means to live with an illness. Literary accounts of eating disorders can also make a social commentary, thus becoming potential political acts, reflecting struggles with discourses and structures of power. In addition to an issue of body image, they become comprehensible as an issue of control, achievement, and self-certitude. It will become clear how one certainly “cannot think well, love well, sleep well if one has not dined well”¹⁵ and if “to speak, and above all to write, is to fast”¹⁶ – at least in these two cases – this is also true *vice versa*: to fast is to speak, and above all, to write.

- 8 Although the eating disorders in the two texts I am going to examine could be read as cases of anorexia and bulimia, I do not want to argue that anorexia and bulimia are the same. In terms of causes, symptoms and in the course of disease, they appear to be quite different. But I will show that these two literary depictions of eating disorders are very similar in the ways the protagonists deal with them and how they affect their thinking and language. By understanding eating disorders as political acts, I am not seeking to glamorize them nor enforce them as positive. Eating disorders are non-productive. They do not offer any solution or gain. Trying to control the body to this extent does not result in mastery, but ultimately in death. It is not empowering but a yearning for power which only leads to self-destruction.

Food and gender in Japan

- 9 We live in a time in which we do not see our bodies as naturally-given objects anymore, but instead perceive them as representations of our identity. We endlessly control, optimize, and modify them to present ourselves as ambitious, healthy, and desirable. At the same time, the body seems to be the only thing that is left when identities become uncertain. It is tangible proof of our being in the world. As a warrantor and as an effect of authenticity, the body has become the battleground upon which conflicts are fought and contemporary literature in particular has rediscovered the body as a means to represent negotiations of identity.
- 10 In the case of eating disorders, “physical appearance becomes the measure of who the narrators [of a story] think they are”, they reduce their lives “to attestations of bodily obsessions, cultural scripts that equate women with somatic experience”.¹⁷
- 11 As a writing on and into the body, the act of not eating can be read as a form of corporal speech. In Judith Butler’s sense it means to “speak impossibly [because it] calls the viability of the subject into question”, it leads to “a sense that one is falling apart”.¹⁸ In literature, this process of “falling apart” can be symbolized by the falling apart of

language. When the body in text becomes the text body, its structure, its semantics and coherence are able to reflect the state of crisis the body is in.

- 12 Food as a product of culture is always gendered. “Maleness and femaleness in all cultures are associated with specific foods and rules controlling their consumption”.¹⁹ In Japan, sweets and low-calorie foods are usually associated with women, whereas spicy food is considered something that usually only men like. You can see this in ads in which for example spicy snacks are praised as being particularly “manly” / 男らしい / *otoko-rashii*. Of course, this is not only true for Japan and you can also find international studies on how the “regular consumption of fiery [and] spicy food [allegedly] raises a man’s testosterone levels making him more adventurous, aggressive and sexually active” (Malik 2014). Men are expected to eat meat, to be strong and active. In 2006, the term herbivore man / 草食男子 / *sōshoku-danshi* was created by columnist 深澤 真紀 / Fukasawa Maki (1967-), soon becoming a buzzword to describe men who are not interested in getting married or in finding a girlfriend, weak men, who have lost their appetite for meat and thus, their manliness. “Masculine foods are meaty and high in fat, while the feminine foods are either desserts or low in fat and calories”.²⁰ Women are presented as food in commercials, as objects that can be consumed, while men are the consumers. Women are expected to control their appetites, whereas men become professional competitive eaters. The only Japanese women who were ever able to become celebrities by competitive eating, were two relatively young girls called “Gyaru Sone” and “Moe Azu” (Azuki Moeno), petite, cute and fashionable idol-like women who baffled the Japanese audiences since the early 2000s by eating copious amounts of food despite their appearances. Only by staying as slender as they were, were they able to become celebrities, because even though they managed to gorge on endless plates of curry and steak, they would in the end remain childlike, adorable, and most importantly: not fat. For them, eating was a performance and they embodied the contradiction which Japanese women in particular struggle with every day: they are expected to enjoy all types of food. They are surrounded by cooking and travel shows on TV in which the hosts try different meals, telling them that basically everything they ever taste is 美味しい / *oishii* and 美味い / *umai* (yummy and delicious). Yet, they are expected to stay naturally thin and cute / かわいい / *kawaii*. Griffin and others understand contemporary femininity as a “profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit”.²¹
- 13 Women were once compared to the Japanese Christmas cakes eaten on December 24 if they weren’t married by the age of 25.²² With the rising average marrying age in Japan, this kind of metaphor has not disappeared but shifted and the age for a woman is now compared with 年越しそば / *toshikoshi soba* / the Japanese New Year’s noodles eaten on December 31. If you are not married before you turn 32, nobody wants you anymore. Just as any other part of culture, food reflects gender norms, it is a “symbol of power, an aesthetic display, a community ritual, and an expression of ideology or identity”.²³

Disordered eating and eating disorders

- 14 Since their discovery as a disease in the West in the 19th century, eating disorders, especially anorexia, have been labeled as female diseases, from “anorexia nervosa” by Gull in England (1873) to Lasegue’s paper *De l’anorexie hystérique* (1873) in the same year. While the first descriptions of eating disorders in Japan can be found as early as in the

Edo period and were reported as [Anorexia condition] / 不食之証,²⁴ they have been widely on the rise in Japan since the 1980s. With one of the lowest obesity rates in the world, the pressure on women is especially high to stay slim and is even government-mandated by the 2008 “metabo-law” which allows employers to fine their employees between ages 45 to 70 if they don’t stay within certain waist measurements.²⁵ Besides public pressure and the omnipresence of unreachable beauty ideals, in an interview on the increase of eating disorders in Japan, Hansen argues that women are “confused about what it means to be female in 21st century Japan. Increasingly, their bodies become the locus where this conflict is enacted”.²⁶

- 15 Pike and Borovoy speak of an “infantilization of girls, coupled with the emphasis on motherhood as the endpoint of female socialization”, which “creates a model of development in which there is no authorized intermediate stage between girlhood and motherhood, and few ways of imagining female maturity outside the context of motherhood and family”.²⁷ Unless you manage to become a mother, you have to remain or at least look like a young girl to be still recognized as a viable member of society. Pike and Borovoy read eating disorders as attempts to “negotiate and communicate interpersonally”, as “instrumental actions, where more overt resistance, self-determination, or rebellion is unavailable”.²⁸ Around the globe women in their “adolescent and young adult years [are] most at risk for developing an eating disorder”,²⁹ but while the concept of “Westernization” can certainly explain the establishment and normalization of Euro-American beauty and body ideals in Japan, it is important to look at the centrality of such cultural factors to understand their increased emergence.
- 16 Eating disorders have also found their way into literature and since the late 1980s, novels like 松本侑子 Matsumoto Yūko’s [No dawn for anorexics] / 巨食症の明けない夜明け (1988), 小川洋子 Ogawa Yōko’s [Sugar Time] / シュガータイム (1991) or 荻野アンナ Ogino Anna’s [The eating woman] / 食べる女 (1994) are about protagonists who suffer from eating disorders. Kobayashi even calls the remarkable number of contemporary female writers dealing with eating disorders in their writing one of the two most notable groups of women’s fiction today³⁰ – the other being the fiction of resident Korean female writers. According to her, both genres share that they “flourished during the 1990’s, having hardly existed in any of the preceding decades”, they both “foreground an acute sense of alienation felt by a female protagonist, who invariably is at odds with the dominant society’s imperatives on how women should define themselves and regulate their bodies”, and they are “concerned with how women can seek a liberatory strategy to resist normalizing imperatives”.³¹

Literary accounts of eating disorders

- 17 Two even more contemporary examples are 赤坂真理 Akasaka Mari’s (1964-) *Vibrator* / ヴァイブレータ (1999) and Kanehara Hitomi’s (1983-) 金原ひとみ [AMEBIC] / アミービック (2005). They both are told by protagonists who suffer from eating disorders and they share striking similarities.
- 18 In the Akutagawa Prize nominated *Vaiburēta*, the narrator Hayakawa Rei, a journalist, originally starts drinking alcohol to silence the different voices she has been hearing inside her head since childhood when she discovers that she can fall asleep easier when she is drunk. Being drunk makes her feel able to function without being constantly abstracted by memories and feelings of inadequacy. She proudly claims being

inebriated makes her feel like “a girl who can get things done, and I like it”.³² When she notices that her alcohol consumption makes her body “flabby”,³³ she develops an eating disorder after interviewing a woman who suffers from, what she calls, “bulimarexia”:

The second trick I learned was self-induced vomiting. It happened around the time I started getting flabby from the drinking, so I was able to kill two birds with one stone. I went to interview a girl with an eating disorder and I had a revelation. I’ve got bulimarexia, she said. Bulimarexia? If you refuse food, if you don’t eat, you’ve got anorexia. If you eat way too much, you’ve got bulimia. And if you go on binges and then throw it all up, if you’re doing what people refer to as self-induced vomiting, then you’ve got bulimarexia. It’s a word they made up for people in the middle, see? Except now people just call it bulimia. That’s the one I’ve got—that’s me. [...] Her legs were so emaciated you could look between them and see what was on the other side; you could see how distorted her bones were and how her joints hooked up; you could see it all, and yet the girl had on a mini-skirt. I just didn’t understand her sense of beauty. [...] And besides, she went on, when you’ve got bulimarexia – You sleep really well.

I stared at her.³⁴

- 19 By trying to replace one addiction with another, Rei not only fails to find a cure but simply adds an eating disorder to her drinking problem, falling deeper into crisis. She meticulously reports her habits of drinking and throwing up and how her body changes due to the constant vomiting:

My skin started looking really bad. If my hand slipped and I cut myself with a knife or something, it took noticeably longer for the wound to heal. The cut would remain there for ages, the skin hard and purple. It reached the point where my fingernails were nearly always split, peeling apart into two layers, because I was no longer able to absorb as much nutrition as I needed. Nevertheless, I did sleep well.³⁵

- 20 She “feels isolated from herself and obsesses constantly over what exactly this ‘I’ is”,³⁶ remembering not only moments in which she felt judged by her body and outer appearance or obsessing over her looks when she appears on a television show, but also from her childhood when she failed to make her parents happy or when she was hit by a teacher. Her endless, stream-of-consciousness ramblings on her own experiences, on women’s magazines, tv programs, her fear of getting older, or comments by colleagues reflect her struggle as a woman in a man’s world, where she is constantly judged on her body and appearance. In her state of crisis, she meets a truck driver named Okabe / 岡部, while she is buying alcohol in a convenience store. She impulsively decides to join him on his journey to Northern Japan, beginning an intense affair with him because she feels that he can satisfy her hunger for life. They both are isolated people who are able to connect through their bodies, the constant vibration of the truck and Okabe’s CB radio, which connects him with other truck drivers on the road. Just like a random signal from the radio, Rei and Okabe are joined by chance and form an unexpected bond, offering a possible way out of Rei’s feeling of disconnectedness and ending in a cathartic outlook out of her crisis and into a brighter future.

The hunger artist

- 21 Akutagawa prize winner Kanehara Hitomi’s third novel *AMEBIC* was released in 2005. An English blurb on the cover reads “Acrobatic Me-ism Eats away the Brain, it causes Imagination Catastrophe”.³⁷ The nameless protagonist, a writer, has been living without any real food for almost a year. She is trying to survive on a diet of alcohol, vegetable juices and different “supplements” from the convenience store. Gnawing

only on pickled / 漬物 / *tsukemono* from time to time, she treats her body like an apparatus that only needs to be oiled and fed with just enough fuel to keep it running:

For the past year I have lived by only eating supplements, pickled radish and cucumber, lollies and drinks. I know how to take these items according to the situation, but my initial approach is to try and live only on drinks. When I feel fatigued, I know I need energy and vitamins. So I take supplements of Ukon and multivitamin, and in addition, chewable tablets of a mixture of [carotene] and calcium. If I still feel weak, I take medicine that contains anhydrous caffeine. Occasionally, I take a supplement that contains extract of garlic and sesame, fermented soybean bacteria, and royal jelly. When my stomach feels uncomfortable, it has too much acid in it. So I have a lolly. What a satisfactory eating life I have! --- I would never ever eat things like cakes.³⁸

- 22 Like Kafka's *Hunger Artist*, she tries to make a spectacle of her hunger, but there is no audience but herself. This "Acrobatic Me-ism" leads to endless ramblings on food culture, people's eating behavior and a crisis which takes over her mind and her body. During drunk and delusional episodes at night, she writes so-called 錯文 / *sakubun*, a pun on the word for essay / 作文 / *sakubun* in which the *saku* is exchanged with the *kanji* for 錯 / *saku*, which means confusion. Her sober self finds these texts on her desktop in the morning and tries to find out more about this "I" which she does not know of but which is also part of herself. The "I" in these *sakubun* seems to be completely detached from the narrator. It seems to be all body and split into a thousand different parts and pieces, amoeba-like selves who each have their own voices. Over time, the constant feeling of hunger, tension and fragmentation transfers itself from the delusional "I" in the essays to the monologues of the narrator who seems to be slowly losing her mind. She experiences an "Imagination Catastrophe". As a writer, she spends most of her time in her apartment by herself, trying to meet deadlines, almost resembling one of the many ひきこもり / *hikikomori* in contemporary Japan, reclusive adolescents who withdraw themselves from social life. She tries to silence the many voices that she creates in her own mind. She plays the video card game *Solitaire*, feeling trapped in her solitary confinement with her cell phone and her computer as extensions of her body and the only connections to the outside world. At the same time she feels trapped inside her own mind which seems to be falling apart at a cellular level. Her monologues endlessly revolve around her body, around its unclear boundaries, its orifices, her bodily fluids and again and again around how disgusting food and people's eating habits are. In taxis, she pretends to be her absent lover's *fiancée*, a pastry chef. She buys cookbooks and bakes cakes and sweets she will never eat. Although she states that she wants to stop eating food altogether, she can never stop thinking about one thing: food. In this way, the narrator seems to resemble a classic case of an anorexic, who claims to be not hungry, while constantly obsessing over food.

- 23 She also remembers episodes from her childhood which might have caused or at least paved the way for her eating disorder, specifically gendered memories. For example, she recalls a man on the street suddenly adjusting the hem of her skirt or moments when she was not able to communicate feelings of indisposition to her mother:

My tummy feels bad. This was something I used to say often when I was a child and was consequently rebuked for by my mother. This wording: "My tummy feels bad". I didn't know how to put it differently or how I felt exactly. I was so sorry and I really wanted her to understand how I was feeling but while I was thinking about how she shouldn't have scolded me without me understanding why, while I was carrying inside myself a kind of sadness I didn't know where to store otherwise, I

came to the conclusion that, while I was trying out different words to convey my feeling, this sentence: “My tummy feels bad” was exactly how I was feeling.³⁹

- 24 Another distinctive childhood memory is the moment when her father tells her that she should not sweat:

I’m choking on the saliva in the back of my throat. [...] I always hated the feeling of saliva in my mouth and I formed that habit of spitting out as much of my saliva as I could. It wasn’t much but little by little the water content in my body went down. I never had enough water inside of me, I was pretty much dried up. My throat was burning and my skin was bone-dry. The amount of my urine was tiny. Those were the results of my proceeding dehydration. This was about the same time when I was taught that it was a naughty thing to say that my tummy felt bad. It was also about the same time when my father claimed: “A real lady never sweats!” I guess he meant it as a stupid joke. “A true noblewoman never spills one single drop of sweat, no matter how heavy her garment or how hot the sun shines. If you train hard enough, you can do that too”, he went on and I, obsessed by the idea to become a real noblewoman, tried to become the lady who never sweats. And so I began, just as my daddy had told me, with my training to stop sweating altogether.⁴⁰

- 25 People with normal eating behaviors are disgusting to her and her monologues turn into angry rants about eating culture and culinary trends:

Everyone in the restaurant was eating pasta or sandwiches. They all looked like terribly disgusting creatures. How ridiculous they are – those who eat to live! How ugly! --- Why do they put things into their mouth one after another? I would like to live on with just drinks, supplements and medicines, and occasionally gnaw at takuwan and cucumber pickles as I am doing now. I would never want to live by filling up my mouth with glittering meals with oily lumps, biting off living creatures’ meat dripping with blood ---. [...] How can such behaviors pass as normal? You only need a certain amount of nutrition enough to live. You shouldn’t have time to indulge in leisure like ‘meals’. I am so disappointed that you are fooled by the trendy idea that having meals is a fashionable act. Those who follow the trends indulge in the pleasure of meals and still keep eating without noticing the vice called ‘fattening’. What fools! You should be spending more time and energy [on] developing yourself ---. This society that has got [sic!] fatter and fatter is making a mistake. Thirty minutes at the fast-food [chain], one hour at the Italian restaurant, two hours at the French restaurant, and several hours of drinking and eating at the izakaya [a Japanese bar and restaurant], while it only takes one minute to swallow supplements. --- A fazzo, creative cooking, dieting drugs, suiitsu, liposuction, fast-food, slow-food – they are all the symbols of our fall. That food amongst other things should fulfill human desire. That a meal with excess is better. That is crap”.⁴¹

- 26 Kanehara’s protagonist is not only terribly afraid of getting older – something she equates with dying, asking herself over and over if she might be dying right in that moment, while ironically starving herself to death – she is also obsessed with everything that goes into her body and what comes out of it. She and her delusional self talk about bodily fluids, saliva, mucus, sneezing, vomit, blood, nosebleeds. She never stops talking about her body boundaries, unable to tell what belongs to her body and what does not:

The vegetable juice I vomited earlier had dried up by the floor-heating system. --- I dropped on the spot and touched the stain. It was warm, just as when it came out of my stomach. I wonder if the heated floor is part of my body. It may be tenderly looking after even the things that went out from me.⁴²

- 27 As the folders with delusional 錯文 / *sakubun* fill up her desktop, she feels like she is splitting into more and more single pieces, incapable of bringing together the

“unsettling relationship with her bodily existence in the world and the disembodied actuality of her life”.⁴³ By staying in her room, she tries to remain in a “liminal space between [...] cute little girl and [...] articulate individual person”⁴⁴ without having to decide between the unfavorable options of either becoming a mother, thus fulfilling the role that is expected of her by society, or by becoming an outsider in a society which does not provide an accepted space for women like her. She can never feel like a unified whole, being split between mind and body, between girl and woman, and between the multiple selves inside of her. Unlike Rei in *Vaiburēta*, she does not find a way out of her dilemma and remains in the room of her own, confused and divided.

To fast is to speak: “I saw words falling to pieces.”

- 28 While *Vaiburēta* and *AMEBIC* present two cases of different kinds of eating disorders, the ways in which their narrative voices are structured, how they deal and play with words and how their fragmented bodies and minds are represented in language are strikingly similar. Along with the protagonists’ feeling of completeness, of their body as a whole and as connected to the world, their language also seems to be falling apart, being divided and put together a new, creating new meanings and interpretations.
- 29 The Japanese language and its writing system offer unique possibilities which Akasaka and Kanehara use in their works to convey the mental states and inner worlds of their protagonists. By splitting up words into syllabic kana or using logographic kanji characters with different meanings but homonymous readings, they are able to transform bodily crises into language. On *Vaiburēta*’s first page, Rei wants to mutter “the wrong one” / 違う / *chigau*⁴⁵ when she is looking for wine in the convenience store, but instead, her head splits the word into the phrase “my blood is boiling” / 血が茹茹 / *chi ga u* to convey her anger. The same thing happens, when she looks outside the truck’s window and sees snow. The Japanese word for snow, *yuki*, suddenly falls apart into the kana *yu* and *ki*, creating a new word with the kana *to* for “and” added to it, becoming *yutoki*, losing all meaning.⁴⁶ She talks of the moment, when she could observe her words, her language breaking down, when a teacher hit her – *kotoba ga kowareru tokoro wo miteita*⁴⁷ – “I saw words falling to pieces”.⁴⁸ She permanently speaks of boundaries, about limits, lines, frontiers, and borders. She fears that the border between her and the night might disappear, a fear stemming from her childhood. She is unable to tell the difference between sleep and death and thinks of the present as a snapped ribbon between her past and her future. She feels like she can’t tell if her partner is somebody she has met before, of the feeling of a transparent membrane separating the world from her, and that the things in front of her are “subdivided into smaller and smaller units”.⁴⁹ Images of atoms, cells, fission and dispersion of not being complete and the fear of leaking, bleeding out of one’s own body are omnipresent in both novels:

And then I realized that there were any number of different *mes* that existed simultaneously within the passing of time. I tried to feel the presence of the body of the *me* I was *here* and *now* but all I felt was a burning sensation on my skin; the inside was empty. Small holes began opening in the surface, and the holes kept multiplying, becoming more numerous; the gap between other people and myself was disappearing. Stop! Cover the skin, keep me from flowing out.⁵⁰

- 30 In *AMEBIC*, which takes its title from one of the delusional essays in the book, the protagonist compares her uncontrollable selves with amoeba, feeling like she is

endlessly multiplying by meiotic cell division. “The protagonist becomes increasingly unreliable as the gaze-holder of the text, and this unreliability is the crucial performative element of the text. The question of who is speaking at any given time becomes irrelevant as the multiple voices of the text come together to occupy the one body”.⁵¹ This feeling of fragmentation is also reflected by the aforementioned English blurb on the cover of the book. If we read only the capitalized letters in “Acrobatic Meism Eats away the Brain, it causes Imagination Catastrophe”, we can see that the capitalized title of the book, “AMEBIC”, can also be read as an abbreviation of this sentence. It can also be subdivided into smaller units, with each letter becoming a different word and other words filling in the gaps, giving new meaning to a series of letters that were read as a unified whole before.

- 31 Both Rei and the nameless protagonist in AMEBIC are writers who feel somehow dissociated from the world around them. They produce texts, they live in writing, putting themselves into words. By writing about their bodies in crisis, their writing also portrays the state of crisis they are in. Their hunger turns into endless chatter, into word chains, confused babbling. Words take up the space of food. Instead of bodies filled with food, they become bodies filled with words and voices. They both love to drink to calm these voices and to feel more at ease, and they both suffer from eating disorders that not only contribute to their feelings of not belonging, but internalize their feelings of not knowing who they are and how they are connected to this world. They incorporate this split between themselves and the outside world and dissociate their selves from their bodies. They fragment their identities and their bodies even further; they create several voices and suddenly single body parts do not seem to belong to their bodies anymore. By literally throwing up food, they throw up boundaries inside their bodies, between them and the world around them. Both narrators constantly describe the feeling of a split between mind and body and between the self and the world. What seems to be happening here in a psychological sense is a process of “depersonalization”. Often, symptoms of depersonalization seem to be related to eating disorders, but while it does not seem plausible to diagnose literary characters because we cannot talk to them or heal them, it is nonetheless important to learn that eating disorders are often used by patients to cope with symptoms of depersonalization. This might help us understand eating disorders as multidimensional disorders, which cannot be traced back to one singular cause, but which often develop as a way of coping with various factors. This rhizomatic structure of disease is difficult to understand when eating disorders are presented as, for example, to be only caused by unrealistic beauty standards in the media – something, which most certainly plays a part in their emergence – but can be grasped more easily when it is presented as a personal narrative instead of an abstract medical report.

Conclusion

- 32 As we have seen, the existential crises the protagonists in both novels experience are connected to their eating disorders and thus to the representations of their bodies. But instead of aiming at disembodiment, as most of the literature on anorexia suggests, we can read their eating disorders as attempts to take their experiences into their own hands. Both women struggle to find their places in society, they are unable to feel like complete individuals because society does not offer a viable space for them between

being a child and grown woman. By relying on their bodies as the only things that seems certain and accessible for them, they subject their bodies to the conflicts they are facing internally. By obsessively trying to control them, they lose control and develop illnesses – trying to be right kind of woman literally makes them sick. Their yearning for intense corporal sensation is equal to their yearning for an intense feeling of self-certitude, for the feeling of knowing who they are. It really seems like “the cult of diet and exercise is the closest thing [this] secular society offers women in terms of a coherent philosophy of the self”.⁵² With their accounts of eating disorders, of their madness and their obsession with bodily fluids and boundaries, of things that are in Kristeva’s sense considered abjects and not part of female identities in contemporary Japan, they produce a disturbing impulse and challenge unreachable ideals and gender norms. Their illnesses do not offer a productive way out of their crises, but these literary accounts can offer a glimpse into what it means to suffer from an illness and also into what it means to inhabit a female body in contemporary Japanese society. The experience of illness cannot be generalized; it is always subjective and different for every individual person. But by reading and trying to understand these two novels we can at least grasp what it means to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes.

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FOOTNOTES

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