

The Confirmation of Individual Existence Through Physical Sensations: The Representation of Heterosexuality in the Works of Amy Yamada

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, feminist criticism peaked in Japanese literature. In response to this trend, some female authors depicted independent women who were not dominated by men in their works. However, the works of Amy Yamada differ from this trend. In her works, she depicts women indulging in sexual love with men. This is because she is confronting a different issue from feminist criticism. This paper analyzes Yamada's *NEWSPAPER*, *Fossil of Raindrops*, *DIET COKE*, and *R* written in 1994. Women in these works are in sexual relationships with men and try to affirm their existence through physical sensations. For example, a woman in *DIET COKE* has desires "to be eaten" by her partner, which indicates not only her wish to become one with him but also her attempt to feel the contour of her own existence through the pain caused by being devoured. Additionally, the woman in *R* likens herself to a "rainbow" in the sense that her existence has been shaped by "thousands of different colors, smells, and sounds." These characters seem to reflect the mentality of people in the 1990s. According to Hiroyuki Chida (2013), a specialist of pop culture, the youth in the 1990s had a problem of having indeterminate identities. This paper examines how Amy Yamada responds to this issue by depicting women who feel their existence through physical sensations and relationships with the opposite gender.

Keywords: Japanese Novels, Amy Yamada, Identity, Heterosexuality

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Introduction

This paper analyzes four short stories, *NEWSPAPER*, *DIET COKE*, *R*, and *Fossil of Raindrops*, all of which are included in the short story collection, *120%COOL*, written by Amy Yamada in 1994. Yamada (1959-) was awarded the Bungei Prize in 1985 for her work, *Bedtime Eyes*, which marked her debut in the literary world. Many of her early works from the 1980s to the 1990s, including her debut novel, depict sexual relationships between men and women. In her works, the characters emphasize building a relationship through physical connections, not spiritual ones. Noriko Mizuta, a scholar of comparative literature, states a view on Yamada's works as follows: "There is no drama and no plot, only the validation of women's eros and its power, and the temporal space of the present which makes that eros possible" (1995, p.101).

The four works analyzed here are no exception. There are no dramatic changes in the story lines of these novels, and dialogue is scarce between the characters; instead, the majority of these works are devoted to the physical contact between the characters and their emotional narratives. The narrators' values of love and sexuality are expressed. Therefore, it is important to focus on what the protagonists and other characters say, rather than on what events occur in their relationships. By analyzing the narratives of the protagonists, commonalities can be found in the ideas and beliefs that underlie these four works. Arimasa Osawa, in his commentary at the end of *120%COOL*, describes these four works as so "Amy Yamada-style" that he does not want to explain them (p.219). In this paper, the main characteristics of the four works will be examined in terms of what they say, how they deal with the opposite gender, and what kinds of values they hold to clarify Yamada's style, which lies at the root of these works.

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, when these four works analyzed here were published, feminist criticism in Japanese literature had peaked. In response to this trend, some female novelists depicted independent women who were not dominated by men in their works. However, these four aforementioned works of Yamada depict women who are dependent on men and indulge in sexual love with them; thus, they seem to run counter to the feminist trends. However, they partially correspond to feminist criticism in that they resist social norms and family systems, which sometimes oppress women's behaviors and emotions. For example, Yuko, the protagonist of *DIET COKE*, is skeptical of the generally accepted view of "true love" in which "fever-like attachment, followed by sensuality, and trust" line up in order (p.145). "True love" in this description would refer to the romantic love ideology. Additionally, in the other three works, the female characters' resistance to the romantic love ideology and the institution of marriage is radically expressed in the form of love affairs. According to sociologist Chizuko Ueno (1987), the romantic love ideology was dismantled in Japan in the 1980s. Masanao Kano, a historian, also pointed out that the framework of marriage was beginning to waver at that time, and Japanese feminists had begun to criticize the institution of marriage itself (2004). Thus, these four works partially correspond to the feminist criticism of the 1990s in that they resist existing marital relations, marriage, and the morality that sustains such institutions.

It must be noted that simply analyzing these four short stories from the perspective of feminist criticism does not adequately explain why the female protagonists in these works are so obsessively concerned with the body in their heterosexuality. Yamada appears to confront an issue that differs from feminist criticism. What issues underlie these works that obstinately depict the physical relationships between men and women, and how do these novels respond

to such issues? This project aims to answer these questions by analyzing the narratives of the protagonists of these works while referring to the social and cultural context of the 1990s.

The Works of Yamada and Japan in the 1990s

The protagonists in the four works are both cognizant of their partners' gazes and the uniqueness of their own existence through such perspective. The female narrator of *NEWSPAPER* is a married woman but has a sexual relationship with a younger man, "J." Their physical contact is emphasized in this work. When they embrace, the narrator describes her feelings in the following way.

I keenly feel his eyes falling on me. He can see all things, but these eyes are unique in the world, both in the past and in the future. His eyes, which exist only in the present, are surely focused on a moment in my life. (p.106)

Although "J" can "see all things," the narrator believes that his eyes on her are "unique in the world," and through his eyes, she recognizes the irreplaceability and uniqueness of her own existence. Thus, the sense of being looked at by her partner builds the narrator's sense of self.

The same is true for other works. In *R*, the female narrator, "Coke," is going out with a man, "Pepsi." She says that she loves the way "Pepsi" looks at her, just like the protagonist of *NEWSPAPER*. In *Fossil of Raindrops*, a young male narrator has a secret affection for a married woman. They do not immediately begin a sexual relationship, because she is married. When the young man manages to suppress his own passion, the woman feels compassion for him and she begins to cry. Seeing her crying, the young man says, "Now it is no one but me who is making her tears spring," and "What a poignant sight to see a woman shedding tears for me" (p.133). This narrative indicates that he deeply appreciates the fact that she is looking at him with impassioned eyes. Thus, the protagonists of Yamada's works, regardless of their gender, have a strong sense of self and are sensitive to the way others look at them.

These characters' attempts to discover their own uniqueness seem to reflect the mentality of Japanese youth in the 1990s. The bubble economy had collapsed, and the expiration of the Grand narratives that unified society through ideology or creed was widely talked about in Japan. At the same time, the existential problems of the individual, such as the fluctuation of personal unity, consistency, and individuality, were discussed from various aspects. Modernization led to rapid urbanization and broke up the communities that once supported people, thus, weakening human relationships, and the individual was thrown into a society of mass consumption. In such a society, many people are guaranteed a certain standard of living, while individual differences are obscured. Sociologist Shinji Miyadai compared young people who blend into such a society as "a piece of empty signs" with "chameleons" (1994, p.106). In other words, he revealed that people's individuality was erased and anonymized in the city.

Based on Miyadai's argument, Hiroyuki Chida, a specialist in Japanese literature, summarized that young people living in the 1990s had a problem of having indeterminate identities. He points out that "it is essential to pursue further in the future how literary works narrate the problem of individual existence" (Chida, 2013, p.22). Furthermore, literary critic Amiko Enami, speaking of the future mission of novelists, said, "What do novelists write about after we lost the Grand narratives and solid identities? This question has become a

challenge for writers who have appeared since the 1990s” (2017, p.280). Thus, in the 1990s, the issue of the uncertainty of one’s existence was discussed in all fields. For both writers and readers, how to depict and read individual existential issues has become one of the challenges in the realm of literature since the 1990s.

It is uncertain whether Yamada is consciously reflecting these individual existential issues in her works. However, it is possible to understand her works from the perspective of this issue. In the postscript to the collection of short stories, Yamada wrote as follows.

There is only one thing that is certain. That is what the person is there at the present moment. If the present moment in which the person is standing is the only certainty, that certainty will be connected and time will flow only for that person. (p.214)

This quotation, which refers to “the person is there at the present moment” as the only “certainty,” suggests that Yamada is conscious of her attempt to find the certainty of individual existence. In addition, the characters in *R* have anonymity. The narrating woman in *R* is called “Coke,” and her paramour is called “Pepsi.” You can notice that their anonymity is emphasized by the fact that “Coke” and “Pepsi,” symbolic products of mass consumption society, are used as the characters’ names. There appears to be an attempt to express the ambiguity of their existence by assigning interchangeable signs to characters’ names, which inherently testify to the identity of the person. In this way, the answer to the first question is as follows. The issue of individual existence, which was widely discussed in the 1990s, underlies these four works of Yamada. The characters, who have a strong sense of self and are cognizant of other’s eyes upon them, reflect the mentality of people in the 1990s, whose existence experienced fluctuations.

Confirmation of Individual Existence Through Physical Sensations

How do the protagonists in the four aforementioned works respond to the problem of having their own unstable identities? To come to the point, physical sensations such as sight, sound, and touch are important role for the narrators to deal with this issue. They recognize the irreplaceability and uniqueness of their own existence through the physical sensations that arise in their relationships with the opposite gender.

In the heterosexual love depicted in these works, language, reason, and order are removed and physical contact is emphasized. In *NEWSPAPER*, “J,” who has a sexual relationship with the female protagonist, is a student of English literature and has a stack of English newspapers in his room. The physical contact between them in his room emphasizes their wild relationship in contrast to the world of language symbolized by the English newspapers. The protagonist feels that “the movement of his finger is more important for me than world crises,” which are reported in the newspapers, and says that she “too personally rejects all morality” (p.114). She does not face others who might be in “world crises,” but rather, she faces the *other* who exists before her eyes. Her sentiments on her own relationship with J are expressed as follows.

I believe only in concrete phenomena. I believe in the phenomena that J’s touch makes my eye moist, that his inarticulate voice causes him to strain his arms, and that entwining our fingers makes him feel deep affection for me and make up his passionate words. In other words, I want to believe what sincere bodies tell me. (p.116)

This quote shows that the emphasis is on the physical senses. In addition to this, the narrator recognizes that the object J is facing is herself, as the phrase “for me” points to. She confirms the contours of her own existence through the physical sensations that arise in the physical relationship with J. The reason why this protagonist emphasizes the body rather than words is that she finds certainty in her own existence through physical sensation.

DIET COKE also depicts heterosexual love, in which “Yuko” and “Yoshiki” are connected through their bodies. Yuko, a female narrator of this story, says, “There was no vocabulary in relationship with him” (pp.155–156) and that they never spoke in “terms related to love” (p.161). Yuko also compares Yoshiki, who devours hamburgers, to a “carnivore,” and she describes their relationship, which emphasizes physical pleasure rather than words, as “we are animals” (p.154). Thus, you can find similarities with *NEWSPAPER* in that it depicts animal-like physical relationships rather than verbal or rational ones.

Yuko is financially independent to the extent that she appears to Yoshiki to be a “rich career woman” (p.149). However, externally defined social identities, such as status, are not important for her to confirm her own individuality. Instead of finding her identity in social activities, she confirms the contours of her existence in her physical relationship with Yoshiki. For example, Yuko sees Yoshiki devouring junk food and has a desire “to be eaten by him” (p.159). Reading between the lines, it becomes clear that she has a desire to become one with Yoshiki. Meanwhile, she also has a slight feeling in her heart that she does not want him to eat her. This statement would imply that she also wants to preserve the contours of her own existence. She is ambivalent about whether she really wants Yoshiki to devour her. When the latter part of this story describes their physical contact, Yuko actually perceives that she is being eaten by Yoshiki. Then she “holds back tears” and feels pain in her ears (p.160). Through the physical sensation of pain, she confirms the contours of her existence.

In *R*, the female narrator, “Coke,” extensively talks about her physical senses. For instance, she says, “My hip has been touched, grabbed, and lifted up by Pepsi many times, so has got the touch” (p.183). This description indicates that the existence of “Coke” has been formed by the physical sensations provided by “Pepsi.” She also likens herself to a “rainbow” in the sense that her existence has been shaped by “thousands of different colors, smells, and sounds” (p.183). It is evident that the presence of the other, “Pepsi,” and the physical senses, such as sight, smell, and hearing, play essential roles in defining the presence of “Coke.”

The narrator of *Fossil of Raindrops* differs from the three works analyzed so far in that the narrator is a young man. This narrator is sensitive to the concrete and beautiful phenomena before him, and he feels alive by putting into words what he sees and feels. For example, he says, “I wander the streets alone, picking up sentiments and creating poems in my mind” (p.121). However, he was an introvert before he met a woman. He says, “I never tell others about the sweet thoughts which arise in my mind” (p.120), and “I lose myself in my own thoughts amidst various pranks of nature” (p.121). Subsequently, it becomes possible to read his self-enclosed character and that he can grasp the phenomena before his eyes with a sharpened sensitivity, but keeps them to himself. The appearance of a married woman triggered a change in his closed nature. The young man says, “I am changing my life of creating sentiments through the things which pop into my eyes. I am now able to give people a variety of sensitivities that I had been quietly hiding” (p.138). In his relationship with the married woman, he begins to open up about his sharpened sensitivity to others rather than keeping it to himself. In the three works I have already analyzed, the members of the opposite gender were prerequisites for the female narrators to confirm the contours of their own

existence through physical sensations. However, *Fossil of Raindrops* depicts the process in which the narrator, a young man with a closed personality, who keeps his sharpened sensitivity to himself, confirms his selfhood and opens up about his own physical senses to others through his heterosexual relationship with a married woman.

As suggested above, the protagonists in these four works recognize the irreplaceability and uniqueness of their own existence through physical sensations. Therefore, these works responded to the existential problem of the Japanese youth in the 1990s by depicting relationships in which the body takes precedence over language, reason, and order.

To grasp the specificity of Yamada's response, let us review what attempts were made by people in the 1990s to overcome this problem. It is hard for people to be forced to live in reality with the ambiguity of individual uniqueness. There is a danger in trying to escape outside of reality to relieve this trouble. The cult, *Aum Shinrikyo* (Aum Supreme Truth in English) was the result of seeking relief outside of reality in order to overcome it (Miyadai, 1995). This cult established a fictional and simplistic righteousness that would ruin reality to create an ideal community. The devotees surrendered to this single righteousness and placed themselves in an environment in which they could remain unaware of the inherent nature of their own existence. This group was responsible for the Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1995 and had tried to forcefully ruin reality.

This attitude of trying to establish an empty concept outside of reality is not unique to *Aum Shinrikyo*. In a review of his own life in the 1990s, Critic Shunsuke Sugita notes the continuity between *Aum Shinrikyo* and philosophy and other forms of literary criticism of the time. He revealed that his own existence at the time was "empty" and recalled that he loved reading highly abstract literary criticism (Sugita, 2017, p.244). He said that such literary criticism had fallen into "closed theory," pointing out that it was "Aum reality itself" because it "attempted to overcome the emptiness of history with an empty idea" (p.244). Sugita's point of view implies that neither the establishment of a fictional justice outside of reality nor immersion in the world of abstract concepts can be ways to overcome the existential problems inside reality.

In contrast to these attitudes, the peculiarity of the ideas inherent in Yamada's works emerges. The protagonists do not find themselves in fantasy outside of reality, nor do they confine themselves to abstract ideas but rather try to recognize the contours of their own existence by grasping the sensations within reality. To express this sense of immediacy, she depicts heterosexuality in which the body precedes language, reason and order.

Conclusion

The underlying issue of *NEWSPAPER*, *DIET COKE*, *R*, and *Fossil of Raindrops*, which depict the heterosexuality of men and women, is the issue of individual existential uncertainty, which was regularly discussed in the 1990s. The characters in these works do not find themselves in fantasy outside of reality as the devotees of *Aum Shinrikyo* did, nor do they confine themselves to abstract ideas. They, while being anchored to reality, gain a sense of being alive in the present through the physical sensations that arise in their physical relationships with the opposite gender and confirm the contours of their own existence. Therefore, these works responded to the existential problem of the Japanese youth in the 1990s by depicting relationships in which the body takes precedence over language, reason, and order.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing.

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