

Queer Ecofeminist and Ecopoet?: Re-Reading Japanese Poet ITO Hiromi

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1. Categorization of *Nature*

The word *nature* can be conceived in different ways. I would like to divide the conception into the subcategories of *outer nature* and *inner nature*, in accordance with Japanese ecofeminist HAGIWARA Natsuko. When I look at nature in terms of this dichotomy, I can say that *sei* (性), or an inclusive word for sex/gender/sexuality in Japanese, belongs to inner nature.¹ So far, Japanese Environmental Literature has focused more on nature writers who deal with outer nature and has not paid so much attention to *sei*, especially sexuality, except for some ecofeminist critics. Therefore, this paper intends to discuss the work of a female Japanese poet ITO Hiromi, who has been thematizing the issue of *sei* with the tool of poetry.²

2. ITO Hiromi's Poetry

2-1. Outer Nature and ITO Hiromi

ITO Hiromi is well-known for her poems about inner nature, especially sexuality; however, it is a quite unknown fact that she has made a number of poems on the subject of outer nature. Her poetry books such as “Kusaki no Sora [The Plants and the Sky]” and “Aoume [Green Plums]” represent the fact. Further, she often refers to coyotes in her poems and essays. Her essay “Monsûn Gâden [Monsoon Garden]” brims with numerous botanical names.

Ooarechinogiku, or tall fleabane, in the essay (Ito 2002, 187) constantly and consistently appears in ITO's works. “Aoume” contains the poem entitled “Ooarechinogiku wo Dakikakaeru [Cuddling Tall Fleabanes]; in addition, it includes the poem whose title is “Arechinogiku [Hairy Fleabane],” two pages of which are filled only with the word *ooarechinogiku* (114-15). In her recent collection of poems “Kawara-Arekusa [Wild Grass upon a Riverbank],” a man on the riverbank “who is tall as an *ooarechinogiku*” plays a role (Ito 2005, 86). As seen above, **ITO Hiromi is a Japanese nature writer**, dealing with outer nature in her writings. Yet “Tanoshiku Yomeru Neichâ Raitingu [Easy Book of Nature Writing]” that is edited by ASLE-Japan and introduces a number of Japanese nature writers has not listed the name of ITO.

¹ In this paper, sex means biological sex, gender refers to socially/culturally constructed sex, and sexuality is defined as sexual desire.

² Likewise, Japanese nature writer MIYAZAWA Kenji deals with both outer nature and inner nature. According to OSHINO, MIYAZAWA thought, “I want to write about eroticism like my writing grasses, trees, and nature” (77).

2-2. Inner Nature/Sexuality and ITO Hiromi

The man on the riverbank, “who is tall as an *ooarechinogiku*,” performs in the poem named “Kawara-de [On the Riverbank]” in the collection:

The riverbank man appears in the early evening, is on the riverbank on the same time in the early evening, turns up in the early evening, sit down in an arbor, there are no others, the man is old and dirty and ragged, looks pale like the dead, is tall as an *ooarechinogiku*, comes to the arbor and does the same thing, sticks out his penis and touches it, while touching, jiggles, the penis gets hard, like I smelled before, the smell floats in the air, the penis in the hand shines and the white thing flies, the smell disappears, the riverbank man, grips his penis on the same time and in the same arbor, jiggles in the same fashion, the smell floats, the smell disappears, in the early evening, we go to see it, from the distance, not for him to notice us, and go home. (Ito 2005, 86)

What we glimpse from this excerpt symbolizes the fact that ITO’s gynocentric poems, which is l’écriture feminine and are based on her experiences as a *woman* (Miyata & ITO 177), are not only concerned with outer nature but also with inner nature or *sei*. In this meaning, **ITO Hiromi is an ecofeminist**, as ecofeminism is the thought to consider outer nature and *sei* together. In passing, ITO is affected by feminism (Ito & Tanaka 10).

3. Comparison With Korean Eco poet CHOI Seungho

As mentioned thus far, ITO Hiromi is a Japanese nature writer/ecopoet and ecofeminist, addressing in her works the issues of both outer nature and inner nature, which centers on sexuality. Here, I would consider CHOI Seungho to be the Korean poet whose work is analogous to that of ITO (Morita 2006). CHOI writes “postmodern,” “deconstructed,” and “deconstructionistic” poems (Kim and Sagawa 22) where “the fragments of the dismembered ecological body are grotesquely presented” (Wu xii).

In CHOI’s anthology entitled “From the Secular City to the Land beyond Desire” in *Cracking the Shell: Three Korean Eco poets Seungho Choi, Chiha Kim, Hyonjong Chong* edited by KIM Won-Chung, one can find a poem called “The Pleasures of the Secular City 1” where CHOI thematizes inner nature including *sei*. In the poem, CHOI uses such signs as “girl,” “sex scene,” “naked,” “illusion,” “tongue,” and “lust” for the thematization of the inner nature of sexuality.

4. Queer Eco poet? Again, ITO Hiromi

What ITO is able to transcend and CHOI is not is the code of heterosexuality/heteronormativity, or compulsory heterosexism (Rich). Japanese sociologist UENO Chizuko in her 1988 essay on ITO sees in ITO’s early works “sisterhood” and “love for women” (144). Subsequently, ITO and UENO coauthor the 1991 book “Noro to Saniwa [Noro

and Saniwa]”including a chapter called “Lesbianism.”³ In the poem in the chapter, ITO lends a cloak to “her,” whom ITO merely “has exchanged poems for one year with, has met up with several times / has kissed several time, has had sex with several times,” as an example of ITO’s experimental transcendence of the code of heterosexuality.

Her bone framework is far smaller than mine / the cloak covers her completely / the cloak covers her completely / the cloak covers me completely / a woman as a woman wearing it / becomes heterosexual who wants to be covered by a man with the political cloak / before I lent it to her, I had worn it and slept with a man in a car / [...] being covered in the political cloak, many, many, many times / I felt orgasm / the cloak covers her, too (145-46)

“Her” in the poem appears to refer to UENO. UENO responds to this poem with an essay where she states that, after denying the fact that ITO “has kissed” and “has had sex with” UENO, interprets the code of “the political cloak that makes women heterosexual” as “just a custom (a historical habit)” and “scenario of heterosexuality” as seen in Foucault and social constructionism (Ito & Ueno 156).⁴ As ITO says that “but, since men are interesting, I just can’t get over with them. I think I’ll remain the same for the rest of my life” (Ito & Tanaka 53), it seems that ITO is not *lesbian*; nonetheless, **ITO is a queer ecofeminist**, because she supports “sisterhood” and “love for women,” and experiments with “lesbianism” in her poetry.⁵

In recent times, some ecofeminists and ecofeminist critics have incorporated the queer perspective. One of the earliest representative works includes “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” by Greta Gaard. Queer Ecofeminism realizes that the conventional ecofeminism lacks the variable of sexuality, problematizes homophobia and erotophobia in Western culture, and considers that the emancipation of women requires those of nature, *sei*, and queers. ITO, who “is affected by feminism and became a trailblazer of women’s poems in the 80s” (Ito & Tanaka 10) takes up the subjects of nature, *sei*, and queers in her poems, which embodies herself as a queer ecofeminist. Likewise, ITO’s queerness is observed in the poem “Chichi no Sikyû aruiwa Ichimai no Chizu [Father’s Womb or One Map]” (Ito & Ueno 118-123) and is consistent with the genre of queer ecofeminism.

5. Summary and Small Conclusion

In this paper, first, I repositioned ITO Hiromi as a nature writer/ecopoet. Second, I considered ITO Hiromi as an ecofeminist. Third, I observed the similarities between ITO and

³ The book is divided into 12 chapters: “Language,” “Intercourse,” “Hole,” “Men,” “Masturbation,” “Excretion,” “Daughter,” “Middle Age,” “Masochism,” “Desire,” “Lesbianism,” and “Exile.” Each chapter consists of one poem by ITO and one essay by UENO. Parenthetically, *norô* means an Okinawan “shamaness”/“priestess” and *saniwa* is the interrogator.

⁴ Freud maintains that cloaks are male sexual symbols (130-131).

⁵ In high school days, ITO had transsexual/transgender desire and wished to become a man (Miyata & Ito 130).

Korean eco poet CHOI Seungho. Fourth, I regarded ITO as a queer ecofeminist. I believe that queer ecofeminist and eco poet ITO Hiromi will continue her exploration further on, bridging outer nature and inner nature including *sei*.⁶

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⁶ In “Monsûn Gâden [Monsoon Garden],” ITO compares herself to a naturalized plant and seems to have succeeded in transplanting her own life like that of a naturalized plant: “Seven years or so after moving to California, I realized that I would not be able to go back to Japan any more. The realization drove me to learn everything about plants. . . . I learned their species, their genuses, their habitats. Then I touched the earth, touched their leaves and watered each of them, then they started to grow” (Tochigi).

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