

# Can Japanese Literature Contribute to the Contemporary Debate on Race ?

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## Introduction

There are very few works in Japanese literature which focus on race. One of the main reasons is the illusion shared by many Japanese that Japan is a “mono-racial nation” and therefore free from racism. This illusion has prevented race from being regarded as a suitable theme for *Japanese* literature. In order to counter this illusion, this paper will focus on some exceptional works in Japanese literature that have addressed race head-on, and examine how Japanese literature can contribute to the contemporary debate on race.

This contemporary debate has revolved around the idea that race is socially constructed, that race has no genetic or biological basis. Philosophy of race has focused on racism as embedded in social and institutional structures and the subconscious or unconscious levels of consciousness rather than on intentional, individual racism. However, it has been difficult to clarify why race is “seen” or “heard” by discriminators, and why the discriminated are bound or forced to adapt in various situations to the racializing perception of the discriminator. Relying on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment, the phenomenology of race has attempted to overcome these difficulties and approach the depths of racism by elucidating racist attitudes and behaviors in terms of “embodied habits” (Alcoff 2006; Al-Saji 2014; Ngo 2017).

In what ways, then, can literary works contribute to the philosophical clarification of racism? Literary works do more than provide examples for philosophical theories (nothing would be more tedious or even blasphemous than to read a literary work only as an example of the validity of a philosophical theory). In my view, a good literary work, through its vivid descriptions, shows us how racism is embodied in our bodies. And through that it makes visible the various aspects of racism that philosophical theory has not been able to show. In what follows, I will discuss the ways in which racism is portrayed by three Japanese writers and examine what can be seen in their works.

## Internalized white gaze: Shusaku Endo (1923-1996)

Belonging to the first generation of Japanese intellectuals who studied in Europe after World War II, Shusaku Endo is a rare Japanese writer who dealt with the racial discrimination that he experienced during his stay in France (1950-1953) and wrote several novels on race (*White Man* (1955), *Yellow Man* (1955), *Foreign Studies* (1965), etc.).

Not only did he describe in detail the discriminatory attitudes and behavior of whites toward Asians: for example, calling them “Chinois!” (Chinese) or “Sale jaune!” (dirty yellow man), avoiding them in trams and restaurants, and staring them in the face, etc. At the same time, he also sharply analyzed the racial consciousness peculiar to members of the so-called “yellow

race” who belong to the racial majority in their own countries but are a racial minority in the West. According to him, the racial consciousness of the yellow race is characterized by “amnesia,” an “internalized white gaze,” and “internal discrimination among people of color and Asians.”

First, those who have suffered from Western discrimination against Asians, while outraged by it, tend not to make an issue of it, but rather to try to *forget* about it.

[...] I didn't think about my skin color while I was in Japan, and even though I was angry in Lyon at the time, I could have left the city and gone back to Japan eventually. In other words, I had a real place and a future to escape to.<sup>1</sup>

Even after returning to Japan, however, students like Endo who have suffered from discrimination in the West are often not willing to talk about their experiences. There are two main reasons for this: it reminds them of a sense of humiliation and shame and makes them lose status in their Japanese communities, where those who are highly regarded in the “white world” are often taken to be superior to others. This “internalized white gaze” tempts them either to behave according to racial stereotypes or to imitate the whites. For instance, contemporary Japanese researchers tend either to try to meet stereotypical expectations by presenting papers on topics such as “Derrida and Zen” in international conferences or to go into the minutest details of historical or philological discussions so as to justify their status as researchers.

While portraying racial discrimination against Japanese people, Endo does not forget to mention Japanese discrimination against other Asians and black people: Japanese people feeling “racially superior” to black people or detesting being confused with Chinese people (who had been the target of racism in the U.S. from the 19th century). Endo discloses that Japanese who have internalized the white gaze not only see themselves as inferior to whites, but also as the most westernized yellow race, and therefore try to portray themselves as superior to other Asians and black people. Endo's descriptions make visible not only that people of color who are discriminated against can easily flip to the racist side, but also that they seek to elevate their own racial status by racially discriminating against others. In this way, he challenges the dichotomy between racializing perpetrator and racialized victim, and reveals the multilayered structure of racial discrimination.

### **Race and gender: Minae Mizumura (1951-)**

The internalized white gaze that Endo perceived was also portrayed in Minae Mizumura's *An I-Novel from Left to Right* (1995).

The gradual discovery that I was Asian wasn't shocking in and of itself. The shock I felt came from being lumped together with people whom Westerners regarded as Others—as did I, a Japanese. To be lumped together with those whom in some hidden corner of my mind I had always blithely congratulated myself on being distinct from was worse than shocking. It was humiliating. (p. 169)

This kind of shock or even humiliation is not necessarily unique to Mizumura, who has lived in the U.S. from age of 12. It can apply to many Japanese and “people of color” who have internalized a variety of Western-derived values and feel happy to be treated like whites in the West.

Mizumura also describes various discriminatory behaviors against Asians in the U.S., but from a perspective that Endo lacks: intersectionality between race and gender.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Shusaku Endo, “Colored Race and White Race” (1956), p. 213.

When Mizumura's American-educated sister Nanae entered a fashionable bar in New York City with her Polish boyfriend Henryk, she was "dressed carefully", sat up straight and "used proper English" when placing her order so as not to be looked down on. Yet seeing her drunken boyfriend kissing her despite her refusal, a white bartender said 'Will you *two* behave yourselves or will I have to ask you to leave?' 'I just don't think you *two* belong in a place like this.'

After the incident, Nanae complains to Minae as follows.

If I'd been a white woman, that bartender wouldn't have been so rude. At least not to my face. If I were white, he would have seen I wasn't enjoying it. [...] he never even looked at me properly in the face. When I came in, all he saw was an Oriental woman with long hair. Then when things started to get out of hand, he assumed that both of us were to blame. And you know what's worse? I realized that it wasn't just Henryk who made me look cheap. I made him look cheap too, because I was Oriental. To some Americans—I wouldn't say all, but to some Americans, a guy who hangs around with an Oriental girl is already a cheap guy. (pp. 195-196)

Nanae's complaint illustrates how the bartender's racializing perception affects what he sees and does not see in her, that is, what aspects of her appearance and behavior are salient to him. By seeing her as fitting the framework of the stereotypical "Oriental," he perceives her "long hair," indecisiveness, and even 'sluttiness' as salient, rather than her proper dress, proper English and expression of displeasure at being kissed. This is one of the features of racializing perception that the phenomenology of race calls "the limitation of the receptivity of vision" (Al-Saji 2014).

Furthermore, she is racialized not simply as an Asian, but as an Asian *woman*. Under the racializing and gendering gaze, being with a (drunken) white man presents her as an indecent Asian woman, and at the same time, being with such a woman presents Henryk as a 'slutty' white man. In the bartender's perception, both race and gender are already at play and Nanae's "racialized body" is elided into her "gendered body (female body)." This perspective of intersectionality between race and gender suggests that discriminatory behavior toward people of color, including Asians, always involves some kind of gendering. It will thus enable us to reconsider Endo's depiction of discrimination against Asians in terms of discrimination against Asian *men*.

### **Seeing with Others: Sawako Ariyoshi (1931-1984)**

Endo and Mizumura have in common the fact that they received Western-style higher education (both specializing in French literature), which made them internalize the white gaze more than ordinary Japanese, and depict the gap between this gaze and their own racialized bodies. From a different perspective than Endo and Mizumura, and on a more expansive scale, Sawako Ariyoshi deals with diverse aspects of racism in her novel *Not Because of Color* (1964).

After achieving some success as a writer in Japan, Ariyoshi won a Rockefeller Foundation grant to spend the 1959-1960 school year at Sarah Lawrence College. Written based on her experiences and many trips to Harlem during this stay, *Not Because of Color* vividly depicts both racism in Tokyo and New York from the perspective of a Japanese "war bride," Emiko Jackson, who married and had children with a black American soldier during the occupation of Japan in the late 1940s.

Among the various elements of this work, I will focus on only three points: 1) language, race, and class, 2) the multilayered structure of racial discrimination, and 3) seeing with Others.

1) Language, race, and class

Ariyoshi shows more sensitivity than Endo and Mizumura to the relationship between language, race and class. Emiko learns English from her future husband Tom, but her Black English prevents her from getting a good job with the occupying forces. Also, on a ship bound for the U.S., she and other war brides are looked down upon by Japanese female students going to the U.S. to study. “There were many American sailors on the ship, and some of the men talked to us, but the students despised their English, saying it was vulgar and unintelligent” (p. 123). It is not difficult to find here the internalized white gaze that Endo and Mizumura observed, but by linking this internalization to class and race, Ariyoshi discloses the various hierarchies that lie behind it.

In *Puerto Rico Diary* (1964), a sister volume to *Not Because of Color*, Ariyoshi frequently describes how fluent and elegant English, the colonizer’s language, is considered a sign of intelligence and culture, and as a result, Japanese and Puerto Rican locals whose English is not fluent are often regarded as “inscrutable” or “vulgar.” She recognizes that criticizing racism is inseparable from questioning the ways in which language is linked to class and colonialism.

2) The multilayered structure of racial discrimination

*Not Because of Color* details the multilayered structure of racial discrimination and shows us how Japanese “war brides” learn it and become involved in it. In order to escape the racist gaze of the Japanese toward her mixed-race daughter Mary, Emiko went to the “land of equality,” where she witnessed not only discrimination against black people but also discrimination among white people (Jewish, Irish, Italian), Tom’s discrimination against Puerto Ricans, Mary’s disdain for Africans as savages, and the contempt with which African elites treat African Americans.

At the Japanese restaurant where she and the other war brides work, Japanese women, who are often stereotyped as modest and deferential, pry, scorn, and curse at each other over the race of their partners (when Shimako is ridiculed for her husband’s Italian descent, she shouts at Takeko, who has a black husband, “Don’t talk big to me, you gave birth to a colored child!”). In this way, the racial identity of Japanese women is affected by the race of their partner; by discriminating against each other in an attempt to position themselves as having a higher racial status, these women become embedded in a multilayered structure of racism, which they then reproduce.

3) Seeing with others

It should be noted that Ariyoshi tries to figure out how to get out of this multilayered structure of discrimination. At various points in this novel, we see the transformation that Emiko undergoes as she lives with her daughter and husband and begins to see the world with them. Living with her dark-skinned daughter in Tokyo, Emiko comes to understand for the first time the seriousness of the discriminatory gaze of the Japanese toward black people (p. 59). By living with black people in Harlem, she comes to realize the richness of their expressions (p. 142). Furthermore, by watching Tom, who works night shifts at a hospital in New York City and comes home exhausted every morning, she comes to realize that the sexual stereotype of black men that has spread among the Japanese people is nothing more than a “laughable myth” (p. 188).

A. Al-Saji, a leading phenomenologist of race, emphasizes the importance of “seeing with others,” which is achieved by “living with others.” In contrast with isolated events and punctual efforts, seemingly minor and incessant contacts with others in everyday life “insinuate their way

into one's prereflective life" and enable us to "see with others" (Al-Saji 2014, p. 160). "Seeing with others" does not mean "putting others in perspective" or "seeing from the standpoint of others." In Emiko's case, she does not objectify her daughter and husband, whose skin color is different from that of the racial majority in Japan, nor does she imagine how they see the world, but she sees the world "with" them and renews her self-identity by critically questioning her own discriminatory views. This shift in perspective makes her own embodied habits of perception unstable, reorienting her perspective through connection with her daughter and husband. In this way, Ariyoshi's works provide us with rich material for thinking how to see with others.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shed new light on such issues as the internalized white gaze, the multilayered structure of racism, the intersectionality of race and gender, and seeing with others. To be sure, these are not new issues. However, by examining the racial experiences of Japanese people as vividly portrayed in literary works, we can see how these issues can be expanded in new ways. It remains to examine the works discussed here in comparison with works written by Chinese, Korean, and Asian American writers as well as writers from other Asian countries and communities. In this way, taking into account the racial experiences of Asians will provide clues to counter the hate crimes against Asians resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and all forms of racism.

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