

Women Writers on the Experience of World War II: The Atomic Bomb and the Holocaust

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My research on the *genbaku bungaku*, the Japanese literature dealing with the atomic bombing experience, has led me to conclude that two essential characteristics are shared by many writers, both men and women, on the subject: (1) their sense of mission; and (2) their search for a new language or a new form demanded by the unprecedented experience they deal with. A cursory review of the Holocaust literature also reveals these two characteristics among the writers on that subject. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these two specific aspects by examining the works of several women writers on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on the Jewish Holocaust.

Immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the surviving victims (*hibakusha*) — both professional writers and ordinary citizens — began to write about their experience, the utterly incomprehensible catastrophe which fell upon them without any warning. Virtually all *hibakusha* realized that they had survived an unprecedented event, and many of them felt a duty to write about their direct personal experience, to record what they witnessed. Thus was born

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the atomic bomb literature, or *genbaku bungaku*, written initially by the survivors who were stirred by a strong sense of mission.

Ōta Yoko (1906-1963) was an author most deeply involved with the atomic experience in her writings after August 1945. For Ōta, who was visiting her native town of Hiroshima at the time of bombing, the atomic experience was the crucial turning point in life both as a private human being and as a writer, as she explains:

I have tried to write novels unrelated to the atomic bombing, but the vision of my home town Hiroshima branded in my brain would push aside those images which were to be my other novels . . . the reality of the annihilation of the city and the people which I have witnessed. . . becomes the closest and most concrete image of a work to be written and destroys my desire for other works.⁽¹⁾

Her novels, which are essentially autobiographical, are characterized by her unflinching objectivity in recording the "reality of Hiroshima," her critical awareness of social and political environments, and her compassion for fellow human beings in pain and suffering. Despite the mental and physical tortures of writing about Hiroshima, she was compelled to write by a strong sense of mission, as she was deeply dedicated to the causes of humanity and peace. Further, as a writer she made a self-conscious search for a new language and a new novel demanded by the unprecedented experience.

Both in her fiction and in her other writings, Ōta makes explicit statements about her two main concerns. For example, in her first novel after the bombing, *Shikabane no Machi* (The town of Corpses), she writes:

I am watching with two eyes, one a human being's and one a writer's . . . I must write about [this experience] some day as a duty of a writer who witnessed it.⁽²⁾

In her 1950 preface to the same work, she recalls:

From August to November 1945, I was on a thin line between life and death. . . If I was to die. . . I had to write in a hurry. . . Carrying the shadow of death on my back, I wanted to die after having fulfilled the duty to write.

.....

But what a difficult material this Hiroshima — the town of death under the atomic bombing — is to write a novel on! New methods of description and expression necessary for such a work cannot be easily found in an established writer. . . The truth could not be depicted without first creating a new language of description. . . .

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At that time I did not have the time to structure *The Town of Corpses* as a work of fiction. . . I had neither abundance of time nor ease of mind to organize these collected materials into a fine novelistic structure in a clear and clever manner.

.....

. . . I have reread *The Town of Corpses* carefully and cannot help feeling that compared to the enormity of scope and depth of the reality of the unprecedented disaster unfolded in the entire city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, my own experience was so small and shallow. My pen is not spread to the entire city. . .⁽³⁾

In these quotations we clearly recognize Ōta's sense of mission and involvement with the subject as well as her search for a new language and form to depict the atomic experience — her conscious striving for a new novel. Her goal is two-fold: to write a novel which has a “novelistic” structure and form and “inclusiveness.” She finds her work lacking in both. And yet, her “unnovelistic” novel and her effort to encompass the entire city and beyond are essential features of her work, her new approach to the subject.

Shōda Shinōe (1911-1965), a *tanka* poet, is another *hibakusha* writer who was stirred by a strong sense of mission. She even defied the Press Code, which imposed prior censorship on everything written for publication or broadcasting from September 1945 to September 1951. She writes:

I composed my *tanka* collection *Sange* (Penitence) with the intention of mourning those victims who were killed instantly and those who died later and of comforting those survivors who are grieved and suffering.

In those days the GHQ censorship was strict; and I was told that if my secret publication of the *tanka* collection was found out, I would certainly be sentenced to die. I made up my mind that I would face the death penalty if I must; and despite my family's objection, I published the book secretly because I felt compelled to do so.

Like one in delirium, I personally handed copies of my book to the people who were crying in their hearts.⁽⁴⁾

According to Shōda, one of her *tanka* teachers who read the draft of

her collections commented that these poems could not be properly called *tanka*. As Nagaoka Hiroyoshi suggests,⁽⁵⁾ this comment must have been directed at the unconventional form and vocabulary which characterize many of her poems in the collection.⁽⁶⁾ What is significant here is that within the limitation of the thirty-one syllables of *tanka*, expression of compelling emotions and thoughts in the atomic bomb experience was possible only through breaking away from conventional and accepted vocabulary and form. In short, the literary technique called "*honkadōri*" which adheres to strict rules of convention and tradition is neither appropriate nor useful in an attempt at representing new human experience in literary art.⁽⁷⁾ The unconventional form and vocabulary Shōda chose for her poetic expression were, thus, her new approach to the subject.

Her *tanka* poems in this collection reveal her compassion for the dead and the suffering, her abhorrence of war, her faith in Buddhism, and her dedication to preserving humanity.

I dedicate the diary of sorrow
To the souls of my fellow countrymen
Forced to die before their time.

Ah! The Atomic Bomb
A flash and explosion!
An instant of utter silence. When I opened
my eyes,
The world had turned a scene of carnage,
Ghastly with moans.

The big bones must be the teacher's;
Nearby are gathered small skull bones.

We the people, unarmed,
Shall live in deep faith
With penitent heart.⁽⁸⁾

My third author, Hayashi Kyōko, is a *hibakusha* writer from Nagasaki. At the time of bombing she was fourteen years old. She began her writing in 1962. Like Ōta and Shōda, Hayashi reveals a strong sense of mission in her writing which dwells on the atomic experience. In consciously choosing to be the reciter of August 9, the experience of Nagasaki, she resembles the unnamed woman who is the main character in "*Naki ga gotoshi*" ("As Though Nothing"):

The woman wishes to be the reciter of August 9. She is a *hibakusha*, and she wishes to pass on the story of August 9 from generation to generation as faithfully as possible.⁽⁹⁾

Despite her strong sense of mission, Hayashi, too, had a yearning to turn away from the atomic experience, to banish it from consciousness, and to live as a normal human being. But, like Ōta, she could not erase the atomic experience from memory. Hayashi writes:

The flash of August 9 is rekindled in my brain at every opportunity. The flash momentarily burns out my thought and senses and scalds my brain blank. Sometimes the flash fills my brain and leaves me stupefied as I was at that moment of atomic explosion.⁽¹⁰⁾

Thus, Hayashi continues to write with a conviction that Hiroshima and Nagasaki ought to be remembered and passed on to the generations to come. Her conscious choice to be the reciter of August 9, however, does not mean that she writes only about the past. Hayashi the reciter of August 9 is also the uniter of the past and the present. In her work there is a strong sense of continuity. The past experience is not a mere memory of the bygone days, but acquires a new life, a new meaning, and a new perspective in the lives of the characters ten, twenty, or thirty years after the event. This strong sense of continuity, a sense of history, "inclusiveness" in time, so to speak, marks the essential feature of Hayashi's work. She pursues relentlessly, yet with the understanding and compassion of a fellow *hibakusha*, those survivors who grow older, carrying intangible yet never-fading memories of the bombing in their minds as well as visible reminders on their bodies, as in the case of a woman, Ōki, in "*Akikan*" ("An Empty Can"), who has a piece of glass removed from her back almost a quarter of a century after the blast and discovers that the glass has been wrapped in a silky, floss-like fat in her flesh as a pearl would be inside its shell.⁽¹¹⁾

Like the authors of atomic bomb literature, those who tell of the Holocaust write as bearers of a message. One of the most explicit statements of the sense of mission and the search for a new form in depicting the Holocaust experience is found in Yaffa Eliach, a Polish-born poet, playwright and scholar, now residing in the U.S. and writing extensively on the Holocaust, although she herself is not a survivor of the concentration camp. Commenting on her work of collecting the tales from Holocaust survivors, the tales which were published in 1982 in a volume titled *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*,

Eliach writes:

The experience [of collecting the tales] overwhelmed me with a sense of responsibility and left me doubting my abilities to fulfill my mission. I constantly sensed that the tale entrusted to me was a living witness, a quivering soul. The painful spoken words were a memorial to a family, to a mother, father, brothers, sisters, the only testimony to their ever having existed on this blood-soaked earth. Now the responsibility rested with me, to pass on the legacy of their lives and deaths. If the tale fails, the only imprint of their existence will be a patch of blackened sky and a handful of scattered ashes.⁽¹²⁾

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During the Holocaust, when European Jews were systematically destroyed and the cultural achievements of western civilization were fragmented, Hasidism continued to create its magnificent tales in ghettos, hiding places, and camps. Despite the unprecedented scope of the mechanized destruction of human lives, Hasidism did not lose its values, its belief in humanity. In fact, it seems that the very nature of the Hasidic tale made it a most appropriate literary form through which to come to terms with the Holocaust and its aftermath. The overwhelming number of the dead, the anonymity of the victims, the scope of the destruction, seemed to leave other genres of the literary tradition of Europe at a loss for words.⁽¹³⁾

Another author worthy of note is Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), a German poet and a Nobel prize winner, who escaped the Holocaust by fleeing to Sweden in 1940. In her highly allegorical play, *Eli*, which

she calls the "mystery play," the pipe-playing young boy Eli is murdered during his desperate appeal to God. The murderer is in the end discovered and punished by the supernatural force: he literally "crumbles" to death.

my feet are crumbling —
 becoming earth —

 It's a mistake, a mistake,
 I'm crumbling, crumbling —
 I'm a stump —
 sitting on the sand
 that a moment ago was my flesh —

 My hands, my hands —
 don't leave me, O my hands —
 (*His hands crumble off*) ⁽¹⁴⁾

Sachs' pervasive use of the Old Testament and the Hasidic tradition may be viewed as her approach to the subject. Set in these old traditions, her play and poems quietly yet very clearly express sorrow for the destruction of the innocent and condemn evil, the force which brought about the systematic massacre. In her postscript to *Eli*, Sachs speaks to the concern of this paper:

This mystery play was the outcome of a terrible experience of the Hitler time at the height of its smoke and flame, and was written down in a few nights after my flight to Sweden.

The shepherd's pipe raised in desperation by a child to God —

attempted outbreak of the human in the face of horror.

The soldier: "If he hadn't thrown his head back, I shouldn't have struck him down. . ."

. . . .

Written in a rhythm which must make the Hasidic mystical fervor visible also in mime to the performer — the encounter with the divine radiance which accompanies each of our everyday words. Always designed to raise the unutterable to a transcendental level, so as to make it bearable and in this night of nights to give a hint of the holy darkness in which quiver and arrow are hidden.⁽¹⁵⁾

Among the works in the Holocaust literature Charlotte Delbo's play, *Qui rapportera ces paroles?* (*Who Will Carry the Word?*), illustrates most clearly both a sense of mission and a striving for a new language. A member of the Resistance movement in France, Delbo was arrested in 1942 and deported to Auschwitz in January 1943. As with the writers of atomic bomb literature, Delbo writes with a sense of duty — revealed, first of all, in the title of the play — and makes a conscious choice of expression and form in depicting the experience. Her emphasis on simplicity and suggestiveness in her symbolic staging as well as in her presentation of characters is her new approach to the subject. In the introductory note⁽¹⁶⁾ to the play, Delbo writes:

No sets. The site is suggested by the positions and movements of the characters, and by the lighting. The action takes place in the barracks (there is no need to represent them; the light and text suffice) and on the roll call square outside. . .

In the same note Delbo suggests an inclined plane for the roll call square and the bare foreground for the interior of the barracks. For the characters — 23 French women, her direction is specific: “*no make-up. . . The faces do not count, . . . The costumes do not count.*” The implication is, as Robert Skloot points out,⁽¹⁷⁾ that these women are deprived of their individuality in their cruel environment.

“Who will carry the word?” The question posed in the title draws a strong response among most of the women in the play, with their repeated expression of faith, “There must be one who returns.” However, the one who emerges as the central character, Françoise, at first sees no chance of survival for anyone. “None of us has a chance” and “None of us shall return” are her words. Seeming ready to give up, she contemplates suicide. But eventually she is won over by the other women’s strong sense of solidarity, faith and mission despite the insurmountable odds.

If there is only one chance to get out of here and for only one of us, we must force that chance and help the one among us who will have it. There must be one who returns.⁽¹⁸⁾

These words spoken by Claire provide the strength and establish the obligation for the women in the camp. These become a powerful message. At the end of the play, of the initial 23 women, only two survive, Françoise and Denise. They return to “tell,” “make known,” “render an account to all the others.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Thus the play clearly presents the Holocaust victims’ sense of obligation, determination and desire to be heard, to be understood, but Delbo also shows the doubt and fear of the survivors — that they might not be understood or believed. In the Prologue,⁽²⁰⁾ Françoise says:

I return for truth.

For there everything was true.

Everything was stamped with truth, a mortal
truth

Clear and sharp, without nuance or measure.

Pure cruelty, pure horror.

Who could bear to face

The truth in that cruelty?

....

The light scared the eyes that dared to seek.

So why should I speak?

For the things I would say

Could not be of any use to you.

And in the Epilogue,⁽²¹⁾ Denise and Françoise — the only survivors in the play — speak the following:

Denise: We have come back

Françoise: We have come back to tell you and now we are standing here ill at ease not knowing what to say, how to say it. . .

....

Denise: If you don't understand us

it's because we can no longer give those words
the meaning they had there.

Françoise: We wanted to be heard
we wanted to be understood

Denise: Don't think we resent it
we knew you wouldn't understand

that you wouldn't believe
 because it has even become unbelievable to us
 Françoise: Why should you believe
 those stories of ghosts
 ghosts who came back and who are not able to explain now?

Delbo may be expressing the nearly impossible task of communicating and explaining the unthinkable experience of the Holocaust victims to the citizens of the world who have not lived through it. It is also probable that these words in the Prologue and Epilogue express the author's sense of inadequacy in her effort to communicate through the artistic medium of the theater, or perhaps through any medium. Whatever our interpretation of these words, the important fact is that Delbo has written the play, for she has her mission to speak, to explain, and her desire to be heard and to be understood, so that humankind may never again be subjected to the horror and atrocity suffered by the Holocaust victims.

Conclusion

Written with a strong sense of mission in a consciously chosen form and language, both the atomic bomb literature and the Holocaust literature have extraordinary value and significance in the history of humankind. Yaffa Eliach summarizes the significance of the Hasidic tales she collected as follows:

These tales are not merely the personal stories of a particular Hasidic rabbi or of individual Hasidim; because of the conditions that gave

birth to them, they assume the dimensions of moral and social reflections and commentary. At a time when human beings were stripped naked of everything, even of their names, the only resources remaining to them was their inner spiritual strength. This was the very essence of their existence, and it is this that the tales record. . . ⁽²²⁾

Commenting on four representative plays on the Holocaust, including Delbo's work discussed above, Skloot notes that "they accomplish multiple objectives: to educate us to the history of that time, to move us with the stories of the perished millions, to raise crucial moral questions for us to ponder, to demonstrate the human action that can be taken in times of extreme stress and how it can be evaluated, and to suggest ways in which the darkest hours of our night-filled century can be kept from descending again." ⁽²³⁾

Similarly, the writers of atomic bomb literature seek to unfold in fiction and poetry the form and essence of experience, the reality of nuclear war enacted in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In their writings, we find a grief and compassion that looks outward, claiming kinship with all human misery, past and present. Moreover, instead of hopeless acquiescence, we find a striving to communicate. By its very determination to be heard, this message from the dead and those about to die affirms some kind of hope — however frail, however contingent — for a new spirit of understanding, and even for the continuing existence of humankind on this planet. In short, these writers, like those who write about the Holocaust, provide not only historical insight but a source of that sensuous and emotional involvement

which (according to the traditional faith of poets) can transform hearts, minds, and purposes. What A-bomb literature can tell human beings is not, after all, the catalogue of horrors, but the ways individual human beings have met these horrors. Only by learning to see life through the eyes of people other than ourselves, can we escape the cumulative poison of our own selfishness. Herein lies the four-fold value of these literatures born out of ultimate catastrophe: as history, as art, as an admonition against self-destruction, and as an inspiration to work for peace.

Finally, as a researcher of atomic bomb literature and as a concerned citizen of the world, I am glad to have an opportunity to write this paper, dealing with some of the women writers of East and West who have dedicated themselves to informing and, ultimately, preserving the human race.

Notes

* All translations of Japanese works are by Nobuko Tsukui.

** Japanese names are written with the family name first and the given name last.

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- (1) The 1950 preface to *Shikabane no Machi* (*The Town of Corpses*).
Ōta Yōko Shū (*Collected Works of Ōta Yōko*) (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo,

- 1982) Vol. 2, p. 304.
- (2) *Ōta Yōko Shū* (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1982), Vol. 1, p. 73.
 - (3) *Ōta Yōko Shū*, Vol. 2, pp. 300-302.
 - (4) Shoda Shinoe, *Miminari* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1962), p. 10.
 - (5) Nagaoka Hiroyoshi, *Genbaku Bungakushi* (Tokyo: Hubaisha, 1973), p. 89.
 - (6) For example, she often exceeds the limitation of 31 syllables in her *tanka* poems; and within a poem, she frequently departs from the regular *tanka* structure of 5-7-5-7-7 syllable distribution. For instance, two of her poems may be described as 9-5-6-8-9 and 6-7-7-7-9. Also her diction is varied — from formal and literary expressions to the informal language of ordinary conversation to foreign words to onomatopoeia.
 - (7) See Hotta Yoshie, *Hojoki Shiki* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1976), pp. 205-210.
 - (8) Shoda, pp. 13-29.
 - (9) *Nihon no Genbaku Bungaku* (Tokyo: Holp Shuppan, 1983), Vol. 3, *Hayashi Kyōko*, p. 278.
 - (10) *Hayashi Kyōko*, p. 299.
 - (11) *Hayashi Kyōko*, p. 136.
 - (12) Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Avon Books, 1983), p. xxiv.
 - (13) Eliach, p. xvii.
 - (14) Nelly Sachs, *O The Chimneys: Selected Poems, including the verse play, Eli*. Translated from the German. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 383-384.
 - (15) Sachs, pp. 386-387.
 - (16) Robert Skloot, ed., *The Theatre of the Holocaust. Four Plays*. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1982), p. 269.
 - (17) Skloot, p. 32.
 - (18) Skloot, p. 281.
 - (19) Skloot, p. 278.

- (20) Skloot, p. 273.
- (21) Skloot, pp. 324-325.
- (22) Eliach, p. xix.
- (23) Skloot, p. 35.

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