



Solidarity on the Margins: Narrating the Zainichi in Yi Yang-ji's "Woman Diver" (*Kazukime*, 1983) and Nakagami Kenji's "Flower Boy" (*Fuaramu*, 1980)

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Abstract

Among the oppressed minority groups in Japan are the Zainichi (Korean residents in Japan) and the *Hisabetsu Burakumin* (lit. "discriminated-against outcastes"; referred to in this paper using the term Burakumin). Members of both groups have produced prominent works of literature. Yi Yang-ji (1955-1992), one of the most important and well-studied Zainichi writers, is known for her female Zainichi characters with fractured identities. Although not a Zainichi himself, Burakumin writer Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992) advocated for and wrote about the Zainichi community, addressing issues ranging from family strife to historical trauma. Previous studies of Yi have emphasized the power of femininity in her characters, examining her work through the lens of postcolonial theory and situating it within the framework of "border-crossing" literature. Building on previous scholarship, I adopt a comparative approach in examining the representation of the Zainichi in Yi's "Woman Diver" (*Kazukime*, 1983) and in Nakagami's "Flower Boy" (*Fuaramu*, 1980). Drawing on the theory of "postmemory" from Holocaust studies, I argue that the solidarity forged by characters and writers on the social and political margins defies the structures of Japanese imperialism and subverts the ideology of Japanese nationalism. By reconstructing the lived experiences of the Zainichi, Yi and Nakagami allow the periphery to narrate itself and resist the stigmatizing narrative of the center. Through a comparative study of "Woman Diver" and "Flower Boy", I rethink the categorization of *zainichi bungaku* (Zainichi literature) and explore how the interaction between marginalized groups challenges the imperial structures pervasive in Japanese society.

Introduction

Theories of Japanese cultural uniqueness (*nihonjin-ron*) from the postwar era insistently present an image of Japan as a monoethnic country with a homogeneous culture, despite the existence of marginalized social and ethnic minority groups. The presence of these groups, including the Zainichi (Korean residents in Japan), Okinawans, Ainu, and

hisabetsu burakumin (lit. “discriminated-against outcastes; hereafter referred to using the term Burakumin), challenges the narrative of Japan’s self-professed homogeneity (Lie 2004; Bayliss 2013). While scholars have often juxtaposed and contrasted mainstream Japanese majority and marginalized minority groups, the interaction between marginalized groups has been underexplored. How does each marginalized group in Japan view and interact with other such groups? This paper addresses this question via a close reading of two literary texts. I selected one story each from the work of two prominent writers and Akutagawa literary prize winners: Zainichi Korean writer Yi Yang-ji (1955–1992) and non-Zainichi Burakumin writer Nakagami Kenji (1946–1992). Both of the stories that I examine, Yi’s “Woman Diver” (*Kazukime*, 1983) and Nakagami’s “Flower Boy” (*Fuaramu*, 1980),¹ feature the death of a Zainichi individual. Relying heavily on the perspectives of non-Zainichi narrators, both works highlight the power of memory and the importance of seeing and narrating the lives of invisible, voiceless people on the margins. Although not a Zainichi himself, Nakagami advocated for and wrote about the Zainichi community, addressing issues ranging from family strife to historical trauma. Yi was concerned with similar issues. Nakagami had a deep friendship with Yi and a strong personal connection with the Zainichi community, making it productive to place their works in dialogue with each other. By examining the personal and literary connections between Yi and Nakagami, this paper will shed light on the way the Zainichi have been represented in the Japanese literary milieu and the role that literary narrative plays in fostering understanding and solidarity between the Zainichi and Burakumin communities.

Yi was born in 1955 in Japan’s Yamanashi Prefecture as the eldest daughter of first-generation Korean immigrant parents. Her father migrated to Japan in 1940 from Moseulpo, a fishing village on Jeju Island, off the southern coast of present-day South Korea. Yi was raised to assimilate as Japanese, and when she was nine years old, she and all of her family members were naturalized as Japanese citizens, and her parents changed their family name from Yi to Tanaka. Yi’s parents also consciously educated her about the Japanese language and culture. However, this did not prevent Yi from becoming passionate about traditional Korean culture. She was drawn to the *kayagum*, a traditional Korean twelve-stringed zither, when she was twenty, and she began learning traditional Korean dance in the same year. In 1980, Yi visited South Korea for the first time, and she became greatly influenced by traditional Korean culture, including musical storytelling (*pansori*) and shamanism. Written in Japanese, most of Yi’s works of fiction, including her debut story, “A Butterfly’s Lament” (“*Nabi taryong*,” 1982), revolves around the struggles and sorrows of a character who is both female and a member of an ethnic minority in Japan’s nonpluralistic and patriarchal society.

Yi is known for depicting sophisticated female characters with fractured identities in her stories as well as for her resistance to the “Zainichi” label. In a conversation with Levy

¹ I use Victoria Young’s translation for “Woman Diver”, with minor modifications. See Young 2016. Translations of “Flower Boy” are my own.

Hideo, a Jewish American writer who writes in Japanese, Yi said that she refused to be identified as Korean Japanese (*kankokukei nihonjin*) because calling herself Japanese would mean she accepted the Japanese emperor (Hideo 1992, quoted in Yamasaki 2019, 394).² Moreover, the term Zainichi has its own historical complexities. Zainichi of different generations held varying attitudes towards assimilation, naturalization, and traditional Korean culture. Thus, “Zainichi literature”³ itself should not be considered as a homogeneous category.

Catherine Ryu (2007) points out that Zainichi literature has been associated with the “voice of a ‘marginalized Other’ in Japanese national literature,” and that interpreting it through a postcolonial lens and its theoretical marginalization “reproduce[s] and reinforce[s] the existing hierarchy between Japanese national literature and minority literature” (314). In other words, the stereotype of Zainichi literature as “literature about the Other” limits the potential for engaging Zainichi literature in dialogue with other Japanese literary works. On the one hand, the exoticization of Zainichi literature as distinct from Japanese literature can be considered a marketing strategy to attract more readers (Mack 2010). On the other hand, this treatment embraces the logic of Japanese imperialism and reinforces the hierarchy between the Zainichi community and the Japanese majority. Similarly, Yi’s writings cannot be understood as an all-encompassing account of the totality of Zainichi experiences. However, ignoring the issue of cultural “in-betweenness” would flatten the complexity of her writings.

My research builds on and adds texture to previous studies of Yi Yang-ji and her writings.⁴ I highlight the connection between Yi’s works and those of non-Zainichi writers,⁵ and I also explore the connection between Zainichi literature and writings about Zainichi as well as the position of Zainichi literature in relation to canonical Japanese literature. My analysis

² In addition to Yi, other Zainichi writers, including the Naoki Prize-winner Kaneshiro Kazuki, also reject the label of “Zainichi” and the politics accompanying it. See Mack 2010, 293.

³ There is a difference between “Zainichi literature” and “literature about Zainichi.” “Zainichi literature” has generally been considered as literature that is written by and about Koreans residing in Japan. In contrast, “writings about Zainichi” include literature produced by non-Zainichi writers about the Zainichi experience. Nakagami’s “Flower Boy” is an example. Other examples include Oe Kenzaburō’s *Silent Cry* (*Man’en gan’nen no futtobōru*, 1967) and Oda Makoto’s *A Cold Thing* (*Hiemono*, 1975).

⁴ Focusing on interiority and ethnic culture, Melissa Wender (2005) argues that Yi’s characters resist ideologies of women’s sexuality through their rejection of motherhood and reproduction. With a Lacanian focus on language and subjectivity, Catherine Ryu (2007) argues that the relationship between Japanese and Zainichi characters in Yi’s stories cannot be simply categorized as one involving the Japanese Self and the Other. Victoria Young (2016) notes that Yi’s works should be considered within the broader framework of “border-crossing literature” (*ekkyō bungaku*), highlighting her subversion of the literary narrative in standard Japanese. Nobuko Ishitate-Oku(no)miya Yamasaki (2019) contends that Yi constructs female Zainichi characters whose bodies are “battlefields” where they negotiate the oppression they experience in the present and “inherit from ancestral trauma” (407). With a similar international vision, David Roh (2021) underscores the role that American interventions play in Japan, especially their influence on Zainichi literature, including Yi Yang-ji’s writings. Roh compares Yi Yang-ji with Korean American authors such as Younghill Kang.

⁵ This article is not the first study to juxtapose the issues of the Zainichi and the Burakumin in Japanese literature. For previous studies, see Fowler 2000 and Glade 2017.

draws on the theory of postmemory developed by Marianne Hirsch (2001, 2012) and Erin McGlothlin (2006), who describe the temporality of postmemory with respect to the firsthand experience of trauma as “belated witnessing.” As opposed to traumatic memory, which is the firsthand experience of the victim, belated postmemory refers to the responses and attempts of people to understand trauma through imagination, projection, and identification. The process of bearing witness to the postmemories of others changes the witnesses themselves on different levels. I argue that “Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy” present the Zainichi characters who have died as alienated and oppressed in Japanese society. The solidarity that both the characters and the writers forge on the social and political margins defies the structures of Japanese imperialism and subverts the ideology of Japanese nationalism. Nakagami reveals that the ethnic hierarchy established between the Zainichi and other minorities in Japan during the colonial period and its postcolonial legacy have caused severe harm to the Zainichi. Furthermore, Nakagami attempts to reconstruct the narrative collective identity of Japanese by acknowledging the Korean roots in the Japanese peoplehood. Through retelling and listening to the lived experiences of the Zainichi, Yi and Nakagami work together to allow the periphery to narrate itself and resist the stigmatizing narrative from the center.

History of the Zainichi and the Burakumin

The Zainichi and the Burakumin have a long and complicated relationship. On the one hand, the two groups fought together with the Japanese working classes against imperial exploitation. On the other hand, the Zainichi were also excluded by the Burakumin, since the former were considered foreign by Japanese people (Bayliss 2013). The modern histories of the Zainichi and the Burakumin have been intertwined because of policies toward minorities and the social injustice they suffered during the process of Japan’s nation- and empire-building. These two groups share similarities in their efforts to resist marginalization, exploitation, and injustice; some populations have even shared geographical proximity, especially in the Kansai region of western Japan. However, they have also perpetuated and replicated discrimination policies within their own groups, especially regarding their own lower classes (Bayliss 2013). Intracommunity divisions have prevented the development of solidarity across the two communities to fight against the Japanese national and imperial power structures.

The history of the Burakumin can be traced back to centuries before the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), but it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that members of the group acquired the legal and hereditary status of outcastes. The Burakumin were mainly butchers, executioners, slaughterhouse workers, and footwear manufacturers (Harada 1975). In the Meiji period (1868-1912), the state portrayed both Koreans and Burakumin as “deviant from the idealized Japanese citizen” as the state “was trying to consolidate these groups into its vision of nation-state” (Bayliss 2013, 70). Starting in the twentieth century, various social organizations, including the Mutual Love Society (*Dōaikai*), advocated for the rights of the Burakumin and fought against the social stratification that

oppressed them. Since the early 1920s, Koreans in some communities have lived and worked with the Burakumin.

The Burakumin are marginalized mainly because of their status as an outcaste class, while the Zainichi are excluded because they are ethnic Others and former colonial subjects. The history of the Zainichi is closely intertwined with Japanese imperial expansion and postcolonial modernity. After Korea was annexed by Japan as a colony in 1910, countless Korean immigrants moved to Japan to seek opportunities for work. Many of the immigrants had been farmers in Korea. However, in Japan, they were predominantly day laborers; some even worked and lived together with Burakumin communities (Bayliss 2013; Fowler 2000). During World War II, the empire brought more Koreans to Japan to work in war-related industries (Ryang 2014). Despite the fact that countless underclass and working-class Korean people supplied vital energy and labor to Japan's imperialist project (Driscoll 2010), they were treated as detritus within the capitalist system. Following Japan's defeat at the end of World War II in 1945, many Koreans were repatriated immediately, while the remainder—about 600,000—continued to reside in Japan (Ryang 2014). These people and their descendants came to be known as Zainichi Koreans (Lie 2008; Yamasaki 2019). With the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, a distinction was made between North Koreans residing in Japan (*zainichi chōsenjin*) and South Koreans residing in Japan (*zainichi kankokujin*) residing in Japan (Glade 2017). Throughout the years, Zainichi have been disenfranchised and marginalized in Japanese society.

As Sakai Naoki (2009), Jonathan Glade (2017), and Watanabe Eri (2022) argue, a common strategy employed by a minority group in order to feel included by the nation-state and assimilate into imperial structures involves embracing the logic of nationalism and mimicking the power hierarchy by oppressing another marginalized group within the same society. The state has intentionally emphasized the foreign nature of Koreans as a means of further excluding them. Some Burakumin have discriminated against the Zainichi, just as other Japanese have (Bayliss 2013). In this context, how can the Zainichi and the Burakumin forge an intercommunal bond? And if they could achieve this, what could their solidarity bring to the imperial and national power structures that have generated divisions between the majority and minorities in Japan?

Yi Yang-ji and Nakagami Kenji: Siblings Not Bonded by Blood

Both from marginalized communities, Nakagami and Yi shared a goal of speaking for oppressed and silenced people through their literature and activism. Nakagami's personal connection with Yi and his appreciation for her work make him a perfect subject to be compared with her.

Nakagami wrestled with questions about Japanese nationalism and marginalization throughout his career. Born in the city of Shingū in Wakayama Prefecture in southwestern

Japan, Nakagami lived in a Burakumin community until he was seven years old. It is important to note that Nakagami is the only Burakumin writer to have publicly announced his Burakumin identity and also the first to have won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, for his novel *The Cape* (Misaki, 1976). Nakagami wrote extensively about his Burakumin community, which he often referred to as the “alleyway” (*roji*). Having a Zainichi brother-in-law living in Osaka, Nakagami was able to examine Zainichi issues at a close range (Watanabe 2022). Between 1978 and 1985, Nakagami visited South Korea several times, and he wrote extensively about his observations of Korean culture and marketplaces and as well as the lives and experiences of Zainichi in his essays and works of fiction (McKnight 2011). Given Nakagami’s passion for Korean culture and how frequently he compares South Korea with his hometown Kumano in his work, Kawamura Minato (1996) argues that South Korea can be considered as his “second hometown” (7). As Anne McKnight (2011) argues, beginning with his travels to South Korea, Nakagami shifted his interest in questions of “exchange and exile” from “the immediate domestic context of Kumano and national literature (*kokubungaku*) to the regional context of East Asia” (171). This transition also allowed Nakagami to gain a more profound understanding of the Zainichi, who were even more excluded by the Japanese Empire than were the Burakumin. Through his understanding of and writings about the Zainichi, Nakagami constructed a sense of solidarity between the Zainichi and the Burakumin.

Yi and Nakagami both passed away suddenly in the same year. Yi died of myocarditis on May 22, 1992. During her wake, Nakagami wept over her glass casket, devastated by her death (Zimmerman 2007). Nakagami maintained such a deep friendship with Yi that “he frequently wrote and talked about Yi as if she were his younger sister bonded by blood” (Watanabe 1997, 363). Just three months after Yi’s death, Nakagami died of kidney cancer. Thus Nakagami and Yi were even connected by their departures from the world in the same year. It is notable that the two stories that I will explore in detail, “Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy,” share the death of a Zainichi protagonist as their central theme. Death, violence, history, ethnography, and family trauma are pivotal themes that recur in both Nakagami’s and Yi’s literature.

“Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy”: Plots and Similarities

The 1980s was a time of high economic growth and prosperity in Japan (Gordon 2003, 291), marked by the accelerating assimilation of the Zainichi into the Japanese mainstream (Ryang 2009). As John Lie (2009) argues, as second- and third-generation Zainichi became more linguistically and culturally Japanese, the number of first-generation Zainichi decreased. At a time when embracing Korean culture and searching for their Korean roots were becoming less of a priority for many Zainichi, Nakagami published “Flower Boy” in 1980. Yi’s publication of “Woman Diver” followed in 1983. By representing vicissitudes and struggles in the lives of Zainichi individuals, both stories explore fundamentally important questions about the formation and outcomes of Japanese nationalism and imperialism. They also ask other essential questions: How should

Japanese people view and interact with the Zainichi? How does a non-Zainichi, Burakumin Japanese writer narrate the Zainichi? How does history affect the present and future?

Both “Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy” revolve around the lives and deaths of young Zainichi protagonists. As Yi’s second story about the Zainichi, “Woman Diver” was published in the literary magazine *Gunzō*. The story consists of eight chapters and is narrated from the perspectives of multiple characters. Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 7 are recounted by a third-person narrator who has access to the mind of the female Zainichi protagonist, who is referred to as “she” (*kanojo*) and “Ane” (meaning “elder sister”). Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8 are assembled from fragments of narration and flashbacks recounted by the people around the protagonist: Ane’s stepsister Keiko, her former lover Morimoto Ichirō, and one of her acquaintances, named Kayo. Both of Ane’s parents are Korean. After Ane’s mother leaves Ane’s biological father, she marries a Japanese man who has three children: Keiko, Toshiyuki, and Toshihiko. After Ane’s death by suicide, her stepsister Keiko contacts Morimoto and Kayo after finding their phone numbers in Ane’s journal. Despite the fact that they had an estranged relationship, Keiko seeks to understand Ane’s life and the reasons for her suicide. It is revealed that Ane was raped by her two stepbrothers, Toshihiko and Toshiyuki when she was in high school, and was impregnated by Toshihiko. Besides sexual assaults by other men, Ane was also tortured by social discrimination. Juxtaposing Ane’s personal trauma with the historical trauma of colonial Korea, “Woman Diver” highlights how Ane’s marginality as an ethnic Korean overlaps with her disadvantaged status as a woman in the nonpluralistic and patriarchal Japanese society.

Also published in *Gunzō*, “Flower Boy” was included in *Tales of Kumano* (*Kumano shū*, 1984), a story collection documenting the memories and ethnography of the alleyway. “Flower Boy” centers on the memories of a Zainichi boy named Yang-pil. The story is told mainly in the first-person by his childhood friend and neighbor, a Burakumin living in the Kumano region. Nakagami constructs Yang-pil as a playful and brave country boy who enjoys exploring nature and going on adventures with the narrator and his elder sister, Kimiko. However, Yang-pil and the narrator are separated from each other when the narrator’s mother remarries and takes him and Kimiko to live with her new husband. Three months after their departure, Yang-pil commits suicide at the age of twelve because of his unrequited love for Kimiko. In addition to Yang-pil, the other Zainichi character in the story is Kimiko’s husband, whom Kimoko meets in Osaka. “Flower Boy” echoes “Woman Diver” in how it sees and speaks for marginalized people. Moreover, it suggests a solidarity fostered through understanding the struggles of the Zainichi and confronting the history and legacy of Japan’s imperialism.

“Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy” share a number of similarities. First, the titles of both stories allude to figures that exist in the history of the Korean Peninsula (discussed below). This intertextuality emphasizes the lingering influence of the past on the present. Second,

by narrating and sharing postmemories of the life and death of a Zainichi, both stories present a personal history of silenced and subaltern people that contrasts with a national narrative stigmatizing the minorities. Both texts also include fragmented narratives concerning the historical circumstances of colonial Korea. Third, in each story, memories concerning the deceased Zainichi are narrated by a Japanese person. The act of seeing, listening, and telling creates a sense of empathy and identification—even solidarity—between the Japanese narrators and the Zainichi protagonists. The oppression and control of the bodies and experiences of Zainichi and Burakumin women raise questions about the roles that femininity and motherhood play for minorities.

Titles, Allusions, and Intertextuality

The title “Woman Diver” evokes images of the women divers of Jeju Island, while that of “Flower Boy” refers to the elite male warriors of Silla, an ancient kingdom that existed on the Korean Peninsula. Alluding to these legendary figures from the present and the past, both stories embrace the Korean cultural heritage and emphasize the importance of searching for their cultural roots for the Zainichi.

It is noteworthy that instead of using the original Korean word for “women divers”—*haenyō*—Yi intentionally uses the Japanese term, *kazukime*. The reason for this choice might be connected to the multilayered meanings that the Japanese verb *kazuku* carries. According to the 2018 *Kōjien* dictionary, *kazuku* (潜く) means “to dive” or “to harvest shellfish” (Shinmura 2018, 553). As Victoria Young (2016) argues, the verb *kazuku* (被く), which shares the same pronunciation as the other *kazuku* but is written with a different Chinese character (*kanji*), means “to shoulder responsibility or loss,” “to be deceived,” and “to be injured” (144). Therefore, by using *kazukime* instead of *haenyō* as the title, as Young contends, Yi underscores the oppression and humiliation that Ane and numerous other Zainichi women suffer.

There is an affinity between Ane and the figure of the woman diver because of the diasporic lives they lead and the power they gain from entering the water.⁶ Although the role of women divers on Jeju Island has changed over time, they have long been known for their courage, determination, diligence, team spirit, and, above all, their deep connection to the sea. The women divers who harvest shellfish, seaweed, and abalone from the sea for a living have been a tradition on Jeju Island for over 1,700 years (Ko 2013). Since 1895, many women divers have ventured in groups to the seas of Japan and China to earn money (Gwon 2005; Ko 2013). Their financial contribution to their households and communities are greater than those of men. In 1932, they also contributed to the island and the nation by organizing a demonstration against Imperial Japan: from January 7 to 24, more than one thousand women divers fearlessly demonstrated and fought against Japanese capitalist exploitation, which included the sales of marine products (Gwon 2005; Ko 2013;

⁶ Although not a woman diver herself, Ane achieves a sense of liberation by committing suicide in the bathtub.

Yamasaki 2019). The legacy and spirit of the women divers are invaluable treasures for Jeju Island and the entire Korean Peninsula.

The legend of the women divers of Jeju Island creates an intertextuality that deepens Yi's "Woman Diver" regarding its representation of female bonds. Nobuko Yamasaki (2019) also notes the importance of Jeju Island in the story by suggesting Ane's desire to return to her place of origin and underscoring her story as a "shared, feminine experience" (410). As the women divers often work in teams and maintain mutual support within their groups, the allusion also implies the achievement of an understanding as well as a restoration of the connection between Keiko and Ane through storytelling and memory. Further, Jeju Island is also the place where Yi's father originally comes from.⁷ The scene of Ane's suicide, in which she sinks into a bathtub, evokes the image of a woman diver entering the seas around Jeju Island. It underscores Ane's strong desire to seek liberation and return to her origin—South Korea:

She dove in between the waves that roared and swelled. The shattering sound of the surface of the sea grew distant, and she unleashed her body into the middle of the water. Both hands and both feet began to claw for the sensation of the water. A mental peace that she had never tasted since her birth immersed its way through the depths of her body, and she flickered forever more in the middle of the water. (Yi 2016, 312)

Completely submerged in the bathtub water, Ane frees herself from the pain that has been inflicted upon her. She finally achieves "mental peace" in the space of the water. The image of Ane immersing herself in the water also recalls a baby floating in the amniotic fluid of its mother's womb: safe, assured, and free from worry. With the title "Woman Diver", Yi Yang-ji echoes the legends of women divers and highlights Ane's longing for Jeju Island and Korean cultural tradition.

Similar to the woman divers, who value team work, "flower boys" (*hwarang*)⁸ also practiced and worked in groups. Flower boys first appeared in Silla⁹ during the mid-sixth century as an organization of elite aristocratic youths.¹⁰ Being sons of nobility, they were selected and supported by the state to be cultivated as future leaders and competent warriors. Flower boys went through rigorous training in cultural and military practices (McBride 2010).

⁷ Jeju Island is an important location in Yi Yang-ji's work. According to Cho Yunju, Jeju Island also appears in Yi's unpublished story "Prostitute" (*Hetaira*, 1983). Jeju Island is both the hometown of Ane's late father and the place that she longs for. See Cho 2018, 61.

⁸ Historian Kim Taemun compiled a history of the flower boys, *Chronicles of the Hwarang* (*Hwarang segi*), at the beginning of the eighth century; unfortunately, it did not survive. For more about flower boys, see Tikhonov (1995).

⁹ Silla (57 BC–935 AD) was a kingdom located in the southern and central parts of the Korean Peninsula. Silla, Koguryŏ, and Paekche were the "Three Kingdoms" of Korea. The year 935 saw Silla's submission to Koguryŏ and the establishment of the Koryŏ state (935 CE–1170 AD).

¹⁰ In addition to flower boys, there were also groups of talented women, called "original flowers" (*wonhwa*), who appeared at court in 576, prior to the flower boys. For more, see Seth 2011, 47.

Initially, they were associated with “native cults and rituals” and pre-Buddhist practices, later becoming associated with “Buddhism and eventually Confucianism” (Seth 2011, 531). Together with the bone-bank system (*kolp’um*)¹¹ and the Council of Notables (*hwabaek*), the flower boys were one of the three key social and political institutions that supported Silla (Seth 2011).

The title of Nakagami’s story alludes to this historical tradition of flower boys in Korean culture. Flower boys were charismatic, brave, and determined young men who dedicated themselves to their organizations and nation.¹² They were also deeply connected to nature, as they would go into the mountains for military and martial arts trainings. In the story, as a child of nature, the protagonist Yang-pil is adventurous and fearless. Born into a Zainichi community “on the opposite side of the thorny shrub-like rose thickets” (Nakagami 1995, 244), Yang-pil collects brass and copper in the mountains and removes iron hooks from bamboo boats on the river to sell for money. He also cherishes his friends, the Burakumin narrator and the narrator’s sister, Kimiko. According to Young-gwan Kim and Sook-ja Hahn (2006), being faithful to friends is one of the “five *hwarang* [‘flower boy’] commandments” (60).¹³

The word “flower” in the title implies the evanescence and fragility of Yang-pil’s life. Yang-pil’s departure from the world at such a young age leaves shock and affliction in the hearts of the narrator and his sister. The narrator is consistently reminded of Yang-pil when he goes to Kumano, Osaka, and South Korea. In addition to the story of Yang-pil, the narrator also recounts the sudden death of another young Korean man whom he meets in the United States at the beginning of the story. The narrator recalls the details of the conversation with the Korean man, in which the latter notes his disappointment with the kimchi sold in American supermarkets and mentions the recipes that his family used to make kimchi in Korea. Suddenly, the narrator ends the story with “The next day, in a phone call from the sculptor, I heard of his death in a car accident on the freeway” (Nakagami 1995, 242). The familiar feeling of loss and agony strikes the narrator many years after Yang-pil’s death and reminds him of his childhood trauma of losing Yang-pil. Using the title “Flower Boy” to tell the story of the traumatic deaths of two young men, Nakagami creates a powerful contrast between the brutality of death and the charm of flowers.

¹¹ It is a system of hereditary authority and rights which governed the social structure of Silla.

¹² Some scholars argue that the image of flower boys is associated with homoeroticism, and that the boys had sex with same-sex partners. For more, see Kim and Hahn 2006. However, the homoeroticism interpretation is irrelevant to my discussion of “Flower Boy.”

¹³ The other commandments for flower boys were to “serve the king with loyalty, serve parents with piety, never retreat in battle, and preserve life when possible” (Kim and Hahn 2006, 60).

Trauma, History, Memory, and Postmemory

“Woman Diver” and “Flower Boy” construct their literary spaces at the intersection of trauma, history, memory, and postmemory. Both stories suggest how historical trauma inherited from previous generations remains a pivotal part of Zainichi identity and how affective intercommunal bonds are forged through postmemory. Through the fragmented memories of the dead protagonists and flashbacks to the traumatic past of colonial Korea, Yi and Nakagami construct alternative personal histories that resist the grand narrative of the Japanese Empire for both Zainichi and non-Zainichi Japanese readers. In the meantime, retrieving memories of the dead may be the only way for the living—Keiko in “Woman Diver” and the narrator in “Flower Boy”—to reconcile with the pain of loss and the sense of powerlessness in the face of death.

The theorization of “postmemory” emphasizes the powerful lingering effect of the catastrophic past on the present and how people of different generations forge affective bonds by inheriting and sharing traumatic memories. In her study of Holocaust photographs, Marianne Hirsch contends that the traumatic events were signaled by the “striking repetition of the same few images” (7), and that this repetition in turn “shapes both knowledge and memory of the Holocaust” (8).¹⁴ Hirsch describes the constant or even compulsive evocation of historical trauma as “postmemory,” arguing that postmemory is “the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first” (Hirsch 2001, 8), or how the “generation after” bears to the “personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (Hirsch 2012, 5). Therefore, the second and subsequent generations bear “retrospective witness” to the historical trauma generated by media such as photographs and stories through their own projection and imagination (Hirsch 2001, 10). In her study of second-generation Holocaust literature, McGlothlin (2006) complicates Hirsch’s notion of postmemory by providing examples of two authors who reconstructed the histories of two dead and missing people with whom they had no personal connection. McGlothlin defines postmemory as “displacement, vicariousness, and belatedness, in which the original experience of trauma cannot be accessed by personal memory, but is always mediated through representation and imagination” (127–128). McGlothlin argues that belated witnessing of historical trauma does not merely happen to members of the second generation, who maintain personal or even biological connections with first-generation survivors, stressing that “deployment of imagination” and “speculative nature” are pivotal for the witness in adopting memories from “parties who may have no personal connection to them” (127). In this light, Ane’s “memory” of the 1923 Korean massacre¹⁵ in “Woman

¹⁴ Hirsch first raised the notion of “postmemory” in her study of Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* (1980–1991), which revolves around the story of Art’s parents’ survival during the Holocaust. See Hirsch 1992–1993, 3–29, and Hirsch 1997.

¹⁵ The 1923 Kantō Massacre was committed against nearly six thousand ethnic Korean residents and Japanese socialists in the Kantō region (the area of eastern Japan that includes the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama) by the Japanese military and police. After the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake, widespread rumors circulated claiming that it was the Koreans who had polluted Japan’s water and food supply. The massacre began on September 1, 1923,

Diver” and the Burakumin narrator’s “memory” of Zainichi history in “Flower Boy” can both be considered as postmemory. Through second-hand and belated witnessing of the historical trauma of the Zainichi, the main characters in both stories inherit the legacy of the past through projection and imagination. Postmemory is powerful, as it is a way for people who are not first-hand victims to pass on and rewrite personal history through compassionate listening and repetitive storytelling.

The person who navigates the memory and postmemory labyrinth to uncover Ane’s personal history is Keiko. After she discovers Ane’s dead body in the bathtub, Keiko is unable to come to terms with her shock and pain, deciding that she needs to “know about” her sister. Her task is a difficult one, as her sources of narrative are fragmented. As Ilka Saal (2010) argues, “Trauma work entails not only the mending of physical and psychic wounds, but also the reconstruction of narrative structures” (353). Trauma creates an overwhelming sense of disorientation, disrupting people’s senses of linear time and causality. Multilayered and polyphonic, memory and postmemory in “Woman Diver” together reveal the reasons for Ane’s suicide: Ane suffered from witnessing the violence and humiliation inflicted upon her mother from within their own family. Furthermore, she is deeply tortured by the memory of being raped by her stepbrothers and her postmemory of the 1923 Korean massacre.

Listening to Morimoto’s account of Ane, Keiko knew that Ane had been haunted and tormented by the traumatic history of the 1923 Korean massacre, even though Ane herself had no direct experience of it:

“Icchan, if another massive earthquake like the Great Kantō Earthquake strikes again, I suppose more Koreans will be slaughtered. . . . But I don’t think that would happen next time. Things have changed in the world since then. Most of them can now pronounce words almost the same as the Japanese. . . . No, next time we will definitely not be slaughtered. But in that case we’d be in a bind. I’d make a run for it, and some crazy Japanese would chase after me brandishing a bamboo spear or a Japanese sword. . . . You know, Icchan, I could be massacred, but then, what would happen if they didn’t kill me, would I be Japanese?” (Yi 2016, 302)

In this passage, Ane’s fear comes from projecting onto herself the terror of the Korean massacre. Ane is living this historical and collective trauma even though she is not a firsthand victim of that history (Yamasaki 2019), identifying this inherited pain as part of her ethnic identity (Wender 2005). The lingering effect of the massacre highlights the damage that the brutal history has inflicted on victims, survivors, and members of subsequent generations. Ane’s adoption of the historical trauma—in other words, her postmemory—implies the lack or even impossibility of reconciliation with the trauma itself. The atrocity of the massacre suggests that trauma resists closure. Instead, it continues to

and lasted for three weeks.

influence the present and future of later generations of Zainichi. Moreover, in the chapter that follows Morimoto's account, the omniscient narrator explains why Ane is particularly tormented by feelings of intense fear—she was raped by both Toshihiko and Toshiyuki:

By the time she realized it, a man was already standing there looking up at her face. The man flung the raincoat he had been wearing into the middle of the room, and with a lightness of movement he leapt in.¹⁶ She had expected it to be Toshiyuki. She would never have dreamed that Toshihiko would be rapping against her window. The power slipped away from her entire body, and with her back against the wall she slithered her way down to sit on the tatami floor. Once the window was closed and the sound of the rain subsided, she fell unconscious as though in their pursuit. More roughly than Toshiyuki would, Toshihiko pushed her legs apart. (Yi 2016, 303)

The phrases “the power slipped away from her entire body” and “her back against the wall” highlight Ane's powerlessness and the atrocity of the rape. This scene underscores how Ane's marginality as a Zainichi and her disadvantages as a woman overlap, and how inhumanely she was deprived of her human dignity. The brutality of the rape replicates and parallels the ferocity of the Korean massacre, given that Ane's stepbrothers are ethnic Japanese. The nightmare of her rapists living in such close proximity to her triggers and adds to her fear of being killed as the Korean massacre victims were. In this particular moment, it seems that the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed has not changed. With her postmemory of the massacre adding to her own memory of rape, Ane is in a prison of endless pain and desperation.

The beginning of “Flower Boy” also highlights the profound influence of Korean colonial history on Yang-pil's personal history. The narrator describes the Japanese Empire's exploitation and oppression of Korean immigrant workers, tracing the origin of the labor migration from the Korean Peninsula to Kumano. In doing so, the narrator suggests how the history of the Zainichi overlaps with the local history of Kumano:

Considering Yang-pil was four years older than me, it was in the seventeenth year of the Shōwa era that he was born in the Zainichi community on the opposite side of the thorny shrub-like rose thickets. After Japan colonized Korea and started wars one after another, because of a labor shortage, the empire commanded Koreans to work in mines and coal mines. Yang-pil was born in the midst of this forced labor migration. Korean people flowed into Kumano because, similar to other places in Japan, it has several mountains that produce iron and copper. . . . Yang-pil's parents did not come to Japan voluntarily as those who came over in the ancient times did.

¹⁶ I have slightly modified the first two sentences of Young's translation. Her original translation is, “No sooner did she notice that a man was stood looking up at her face. The man flung down the raincoat he had been wearing into the middle of the room, and with a lightness of movement had leapt in.”

Instead, they were forced to migrate under the brutal oppression of the Japanese Empire. The reason that I call Yang-pil by his (Korean) name is because this was how his brothers addressed him. Once, when I did call him the same way his brothers did, Yang-pil ran after me saying, “I will beat you!” (Nakagami 1995, 244)

Despite his young age, Yang-pil is aware of his marginality as a Zainichi, so he does not want his true identity as a Zainichi to be revealed. Therefore, when the narrator calls him by his Korean name instead of his Japanese name, Yamada, he is offended. Yang-pil’s effort to pass as Japanese echoes Ane’s fear of being found out as Zainichi at her school. Their feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and shame add to the brutal collective colonial history of exploitation and oppression. Further, the traumatic history of the Zainichi echoes that of the Burakumin. Both Burakumin and Zainichi had to confront state policies of control, assimilation, and exploitation in the modern era, and this state of affairs continues today. These two populations’ similarly marginalized positions allow Nakagami to empathize with the Zainichi community in its relentless struggle and resistance against imperial structures. This brings us to another set of questions: Who has the right to narrate the story of the Zainichi besides the Zainichi themselves? And what does it mean to listen to and tell the obscured and forgotten history of an individual Zainichi? As an inheritor of the traumatic Zainichi postmemory herself, Yi reconstructs the suffering of Zainichi women in the past and the present through narrating Ane’s story. Although not a Zainichi himself, by embracing the postmemory of the Zainichi, Nakagami rewrote the national history of Japan and revealed the oppression inflicted on the Zainichi by the nation. The success of Nakagami’s narration owes more to his sincerity, compassion, and contemplation than to his minority identity.

Belated Witnessing, Imagination, and Identification

Instead of using a first-person Zainichi narrator to tell stories about themselves, both Yi and Nakagami intentionally chose non-Zainichi narrators. Through the process of belated witnessing, imagining, and identifying with the stories of the deceased Zainichi,—Ane in “Woman Diver” and Yang-pil in “Flower Boy”—Keiko in the case of the former story and the unnamed narrator in the case of the latter are able to empathize with the struggles of the Zainichi and reflect on the mechanisms of Japanese imperialism and nationalism. In each of the two stories, the distance created between the Zainichi character and non-Zainichi narrator constructs a contemplative space for the reader to think about the oppression faced by the Zainichi and Burakumin at both individual and systemic levels.

In “Woman Diver”, Keiko’s feelings toward Ane undergo drastic changes, developing in stages from jealousy, distrust, disgust, estrangement, and guilt to sorrow, and finally compassion. Eventually, Keiko recognizes and understands Ane’s suffering and struggle as a Zainichi woman. These difficulties that Ane has experienced are manifested in the repeated use of metaphors involving insects. Keiko’s questions about constructed Japanese

identities are manifested in her refusal to wear a kimono at her coming-of-age ceremony (*seijinshiki*).

The narrator mentions several times that Keiko feels irritation inside herself as if there were a small insect moving within her chest. The last time that this feeling appears is in the last chapter, on the day of her coming-of-age ceremony:

For all the while she had been sitting there, a small bug continued to ache inside Keiko's chest. She could not yet ascertain the true identity of the bug, but the more she thought of her sister, the more this tiny bug eluded her grasp, and the more it ached. (Yi 2016, 312)

Noting that the pronunciation of “bug” in Japanese—*mushi*—is similar to the Japanese word for “not dead,” Victoria Young (2016) argues that the insect represents “the unknowability of [Ane] in her absence while serving as an irrepressible reminder of her former existence” (154). However, I would argue that the bug symbolizes the fear and pain experienced by Ane. According to Kayo, Ane “was terrified of insects” (Yi 2016, 306). Although it is unclear why, Keiko's thoughts of and longing for Ane are accompanied by this uncontrollable feeling of pain, which metamorphoses into a moving insect. By sensing the insect that Ane is terrified of in her body, Keiko is finally connected to Ane through pain. Before this moment, Keiko can only imagine Ane's pain of living as a Zainichi, but now, she feels the pain physically whenever she thinks of Ane.

Keiko's loss of interest in kimonos suggests her resistance to the constructed gender and national identities of Japan, as the kimono is a culturally charged item of traditional clothing. The coming-of-age ceremony celebrates turning twenty years old and entering into adulthood—or, more specifically, becoming a qualified and legal citizen of the nation (Yamasaki 2019). According to Kayo, Ane searched for doctors who could perform surgery to remove her uterus and ovaries on her coming-of-age day. As Wender (2005) and Yamasaki (2019) both note, this shows Ane's determination to reject motherhood and prevent herself from bearing any Korean descendants in Japan. In contrast, in “Flower Boy,” Kimiko has to have her uterus removed due to her deteriorating health conditions. Kimiko is tortured by a strong sense of incompleteness after undergoing the surgery and hearing that her Zainichi husband had had a child with another woman in South Korea. Although Kimiko already had a daughter with her husband, in the societal dictates of motherhood, bearing children seems to provide women with a sense of security as they are fulfilling their jobs of reproduction. However, it also excludes women who lack the desire or capability to bear children from the national narrative of a complete womanhood and a qualified citizenship. For women of minorities, it sometimes remains a difficult decision to give birth to children and worry about them suffering under similar systems of oppression. Being abandoned by their husbands renders women of minorities in a more disadvantaged position in a patriarchal and homogeneous society. In “Woman Diver,” after hearing about Ane's coming-of-age-day story, her sudden pregnancy, and her violation by men, Keiko

understands the circumstances and struggles that have led to Ane's decision. Keiko also comes to question how the nation oppressed Ane as a member of an ethnic minority, and how society dictates their roles as women. Therefore, her loss of interest in wearing the kimono symbolizes her hesitance to claim citizenship of a country in which Ane suffered so severely.

Similarly, citizenship and nationalism are also challenged in "Flower Boy". In the first sentence of the story, Nakagami Kenji emphasizes the similarity between the pronunciation of the Japanese place "Kumano" and the old pronunciation of the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryŏ, "Koma." Through establishing a connection between his hometown and historical Korea, Nakagami imagines a transnational universalism and East Asian solidarity by decentering the Japanese Empire. Moreover, Nakagami suggests that the ancestors of the Japanese people came from the Korean Peninsula in the same paragraph in which he introduces Yang-pil:

Korean people flowed into Kumano because, similar to other places in Japan, it has several mountains that produce iron and copper. This is ironic if we consider it alongside the national history of Japan. At the beginning of the nation, people who mastered the technology of using metal and had more advanced culture came from the Korean Peninsula to Japan in groups for iron and copper. It is clear that Japanese people were initially migrants to this island country. (Nakagami 1995, 244)

The narrator's rewriting of the origin of the Japanese people and Japanese history is echoed in the last paragraph of the story, in which he identifies himself as Korean. By subverting the narrative of Japan's national history, the narrator challenges the fundamental logic of Japanese nationalism. More specifically, the narrator violates the common dictates of colonialism, which often label the colonized as backward. Instead, he highlights the fact that people from the Korean Peninsula had more advanced technology and culture than the Japanese. Instead of objectifying the Koreans as colonial subjects, the narrator recognizes the autonomy and dignity in the Korean people. By voicing their history and underscoring the differences between their own narratives and imaginations and those of the empire, the narrator empowers people on the periphery to cast a strong counter-gaze toward the institutional mechanisms of the center.

In the last paragraph of the story, after the narrator arrives in Seoul and is sitting in a cafeteria, he recalls where he is originally from:

As I ate the dog meat, which tasted slightly different from venison or pork, I suddenly realized that the reason that I continue to be drawn to this land is that it is where my ancestors come from. I did not have any definite proof, but I was amused each time when the people from my alleyway entertained themselves by trying to guess who my grandfather might be, giving first one name and then another. At that

time, I thought that my paternal grandfather had come from South Korea, and a childhood memory came to me: my grandfather had worn a white *jeogori*¹⁷ and called me “Yang-pil” as he lifted me into his arms. (Nakagami 1995, 252)

The narrator emphasizes an unbreakable bond between the Burakumin and the Zainichi by suggesting that they share the same Korean ancestors and blood. The narrator’s self-identification as a Korean is strengthened by his presence in Korea and his taste for Korean food as well as his memories of his Korean grandfather and his real name, Yang-pil. Given that the aforementioned example can be considered as the narrator’s retelling of Japanese national history, this passage manifests his attempt to rewrite his own personal history as well as the histories of the Burakumin and the Zainichi. By revealing that his real name is Yang-pil, the narrator uncovers his secret, that he has concealed his real ethnic identity, which echoes the common practice of “passing” for members of the Burakumin and Zainichi communities in Japan. It is after he leaves Japan and arrives in South Korea that he finally realizes who he is and has the courage to admit that he is Korean.

The narrator builds a sense of solidarity between the Zainichi and the Burakumin by underscoring how the experience of marginality is shared by both communities, given that each has its own unique traumatic past. As Watanabe Eri (2022) also notes, the narrator suggests that Yang-pil commits suicide because he realizes the futility of his love for Kimiko and the social gap that exists between them because the Burakumin are still considered Japanese, while the Zainichi are not. Yang-pil is not alone in suffering from alienation and oppression. Earlier, when the narrator and Kimiko live with their stepfather’s family, the siblings experience severe discrimination because of the “bad manners” they have brought from the alleyway (Nakagami 1995, 248). The narrator’s empathy for Yang-pil comes from their deep friendship and their shared marginality.

Conclusion

By sharing the history, memory, and postmemory of the Zainichi, both Keiko in “Woman Diver” and the narrator in “Flower Boy” create strong bonds with their deceased loved ones and the Zainichi community. They recognize the suffering and pain of the Zainichi and reflect on the ingrained imperial power structures that create their oppression. By rethinking the category of “Zainichi literature” and comparing the literature of Yi and Nakagami, I argue that the rewriting of Zainichi history allows marginalized people to be seen and their history to be documented, which challenges the history of the minority in the grand narrative of the nation. The solidarity between the minorities does not only originate from empathetic identification, but also rises from a mutual awareness of the origins and outcomes of ethnic stratification.

¹⁷ *Jeogori* is a traditional Korean garment worn by both men and women.

These two stories prompt us to consider not only how to recount and write the history of the Zainichi and other marginalized populations, but also why these histories should be told. Above all, who will have the right to tell these histories, besides the marginalized people themselves? What risks come with speaking for minorities? With the increasing social inequality and xenophobia exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider and revisit these questions. Nakagami was reminded of the struggles of the Burakumin by witnessing the oppression that the Zainichi had suffered. However, he did not utilize the postmemory of the Zainichi to narrate the trauma of the Burakumin. As Rachel DiNitto (2019) writes in *Fukushima Fiction*, narrating the trauma of minorities entails ethical concerns, since a catastrophe can be consumed and appropriated by writers to tell decontextualized stories or to reconcile them with their own struggles. Therefore, it is important to remember that narrating the stories of minorities risks subsuming their struggles and pain into decontextualized and universalized narratives or reinforcing stereotypes and structures of national and imperial power.

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