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The Waves of Words: Literature of 3/11 in and around Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale of the Time Being*

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Abstract

Literature has often been turned to during global chaos of world wars, terrorism, and unprecedented natural disasters due to rapidly advancing technology. As Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 created Atomic Bomb literature, 9/11 in New York created 9/11 literature. Named 3/11 after 9/11, the giant earthquake and tsunami that hit North-East Japan on 11 March 2011 founded the 3/11 literature. This group of Japanese writers could not help writing, directly or indirectly, on 3/11, initiating the foundation of a 3/11 literature. It was Ruth Ozeki on the other side of the ocean gave the voice to 3/11, by completing her novel. In and around Ozeki's *The Tale of the Time Being* (2013), therefore, there is a shared consciousness of making waves in the form of literature.

3/11 literature is more complicated than Atomic Bomb literature or 9/11 literature. Atomic Bombs and 9/11 are also interrelated as far as both of them represent monstrous wars which left even the unwounded with scars in this modernized and globalized world. Atomic Bombs and 3/11 are furthermore connected because 3/11 resulted in the crisis of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. 3/11 brings to us not only the reality of the visible physical destruction and disaster, but also the invisible nuclear pollution and influence on our lives, intensifying the inquiry into the reason for and the meaning of existence and life. Ultimately, contemporary writers are making waves of words, and those words are echoing in and around Ozeki's *A Tale of the Time Being*, which examines the interwoven psychological conflicts issued by 3/11 spreading across the ocean and over the generations.

Keywords: Asian American literature, comparative literature, literature of catastrophe

I. Introduction

The Great Earthquake and Tsunami in East North Japan on March 11, 2011 with its following Fukushima Nuclear Meltdown became the global issue, not only as a natural disaster caused by the global warming and its related causes, but also as the aftermath of globalization on all levels. For the Japanese, 3/11, named after 9.11, is engraved as one of the most terrible traumatic experiences since World War II. Consequently, the literature of 3/11 was born and is currently growing all over Japan as well as across the Pacific Ocean. In “The Words,” Shintaro Tanikawa expresses its birth:

“Words grown old from overuse
 Come alive again with our pain
 Grow deep with our sadness
 As if backed by silence
 They grow toward new meanings” (Tanikawa, 2012)

As Tanikawa ultimately reaffirms the power of words after 3/11, the writers who once lost their words in the wake of the massive catastrophes have been gradually awakened to their mission. Many Japanese writers could not find their words to express the unbelievable crisis just after 3/11. Some of them had to keep writing something else, while others needed silence (Ekunim, 2012). The literature of catastrophe is grounded upon skepticism and criticism of the conventional meanings and narratives of literature. In post 3/11, therefore, literature has been sought, tested, yet not settled completely. Because 3/11 represents the multi-layered and enlarged issues originated from globalization, it is currently forming the waves of a literature.

II. The Global Catastrophe and Trauma

This globalized era is confronted with the rapidly transforming catastrophes on this planet, yet it is at the same time blessed with new possibilities. The twentieth-first century is witnessing the changing globalization in economics, military power, technology, environment, culture, and international affairs. Though most of consequences of globalization are more complicated political, economic, environmental, social, cultural, and religious catastrophes, some of them definitely bring to us the positive aspects. The gap between these negative and positive aspects of globalization has been expanded so that it makes the catastrophe more serious. In this borderless era due to globalization, furthermore, there are heated strifes on national territorials, racial conflicts, religious borders, and dangerous environmental conditions leading to natural mass disasters. All of these are categorized into the catastrophe of globalization in this century.

3/11 is primarily the natural disaster in climatic variation, yet followed by radiation leakage of Fukushima nuclear power station that evoked the antinuclear movement. Fukushima nuclear plant station accident contains the potential threat of postwar nuclear weapons and wars since the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because of the rapid technological development and the environmental devastation, 3/11 is shifted to a more man-made disaster than a natural disaster. Even though global warming caused by carbon dioxide threatens us, denuclearization became the international issue. Most significantly, 3/11 is not the temporal incident, yet the consequence of the prolonged thorny problems of this planet. 3/11 was transmitted to almost every part of the planet, embodying the on-going hazard of globalization, that cannot be prevented, as the fate of this globe..

Because of the globalized communication tools, the consequences of those globalized issues have been swiftly conveyed to us beyond national borders, simultaneously viewed like the movies. Due to the rapid development and spread of internet as a global communication tool, it is quite easy to access to the news and public opinions, and even transfer our own personal opinions, photos, and videos through Facebook, Twitter, and Vine, and as a result suffering virtually from trauma. Though it is easy, it is not safe to rely on the globalized communication network. E. Ann Kaplan points out that “so-called mediatized trauma is important” because most people in modern era “encounter trauma by media” (Kaplan, 2005). The danger of “mediatized trauma” affects the prolonged psychological instability and ultimately attributes to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). The visual and super realistic impact from the TV screen is too strong to be abandoned, forgotten, and diseased. As far as news is mercilessly transmitted to everywhere almost simultaneously beyond geographical borders by internet nowadays,

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