Writings from Under the Mushroom Cloud: Atomic Bomb Literature as a Literature of Atrocity

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Erratum
Thia paper was re-uploaded, September 2, 2024, to correct an omission in the author's affiliation on page 77.

Abstract

Atomic bomb literature comprises texts that emerged out of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Almost all these writings deal directly or indirectly with the singular experience of the world's first nuclear attacks. A-bomb literature has long been pushed to the margins of Japanese literature, often dismissed as testimonial writing or even history, and excluded from writings about violence. Moreover, the appropriation of the Hiroshima experience by peace and anti-nuclear movements has limited our understanding of the atomic bombings and framed it within the anti-nuclear discourse. This has had the effect of limiting the "subversive potential of Hiroshima." Hiroshima as a historic event in world history has become part of a much larger humanist narrative which collectivises and universalises the atomic bombing. These narratives portray the atomic holocaust as a universal offence against humanity and not as crimes against the people of one country. The popular and dominant narratives of Hiroshima have failed to acknowledge the atomic bombing as an atrocity. This paper will argue that atomic bomb literature must be read, and interpreted, as a literature of atrocity. My argument is based on Lawrence Langer's proposition that a literature of atrocity deals with the disintegration of the human image in the face of inappropriate death. A literature of atrocity strips death of its romantic dress and reveals man's fragile existence and the vulnerability of the flesh. In short, it deals with "inappropriate death."

Keywords: atomic bomb literature, atomic bombings, Hiroshima, literature of atrocity, Japanese post-war literature

Before Hiroshima, even before the first atomic bomb experiment, there was a type of fiction that predicted the development of such a weapon. As early as 1914, H.G. Wells predicted the atom bomb in his novel *The World Set Free*. This earliest vision of atomic energy was as a source of power that could light up cities for a whole year and power battleships (Wells, 1914, p. 26). The discovery of the power of the atom had a profound social impact and was often compared to the discovery of fire. Thus, the advent of radioactivity unveiled the "possibility of an entirely new civilization." This "new civilization" was to be a utopia marked by plenty, an Eden (Wells, 1914, p. 28). Years later, these same ideas were echoed by President Truman while announcing the world's first atomic bomb attack. The dream of an Eden that the novelist imagined in *The World Set Free*, however, was short-lived. The atomic power first brought progress and then war, the "last war." As he wrote in *The Last War*, the world had entered a "monstrous phase of destruction" as the "the unquenchable crimson conflagrations of the atomic bombs" roared (Wells, 1914, p. 137). The bombs incinerated institutions – financial, industrial, political, and social – that held human society together: "Most of the capital cities of the world were burning; millions of people had already perished, and over great areas government was at an end" (Wells, 1914, p. 137).

Wells' work not only predicted the bomb but may have inspired it; it may also have foreseen the literature that would be borne out of the nuclear ruins of the future. Wells' remark that "no complete contemporary account of the explosion of the atomic bombs survives" (p. 202) is eerily familiar to John Whittier Treat's comment, from his book *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki*: "Everything one first reads of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is revealed to be incorrect somehow" (p. 84). Since the power of the bomb lay not just in disrupting human society but also in fragmenting narrative, time, and memory, it was only fitting that atomic bomb literature replicated this fragmentation. If literature predicted the bomb, then it is to literature we must turn to understand Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Atomic bomb literature must begin first by acknowledging the violence of the bomb and by recognizing the event as an atrocity. In the seven decades since the world's first atomic bomb, nuclear weapons one thousand times more powerful than "Little Boy" have proliferated, introducing into our everyday vocabulary terms like thermonuclear and megadeath. The first atom bomb now seems banal; its power miniscule compared to the newer weapons of mass annihilation. According to Yuki Miyamoto, violence becomes banal when the act of violence is normalised and when representations of such acts fail to reveal the real horrors of the violence (p. 125).

The atomic bomb narratives that emerged from the ruins of Hiroshima have failed to stir the imagination of the public and reveal the true horrors of atomic warfare. One of the dominant narratives of the atomic bombing was one forwarded by the Americans that propagated the idea that the bombings were necessary to end the war. The first American atomic bomb narrative (a statement by the President of the United States) introduced three key points: (i) in the "race" against the Germans, the Allied powers had won the "battle of the laboratories" by developing the atom bomb before their enemies; (ii) atomic energy could one day be used as a power

source; (iii) and atomic power could be used to maintain peace in the world. This narrative of Hiroshima was one of technological triumph and peace, one that propelled the world into the nuclear age, with the United States at the helm.

Meanwhile, in Japan the post-war Japanese national identity was reconfigured by reconstructing and restructuring the collective memory of the atomic bombings, which was employed to invent the myth of Japanese victimhood. In the shadow of the atomic bomb, it was convenient for Japan to forget its wartime transgressions that came to be seen as "conventional" forms of war as against the unconventional might of nuclear power (Orr, 2001, p. 44). Since Japan did not, nor did it plan to, possess nuclear weapons, it could fully embrace the role of the victim in the postwar period. The atomic narratives that thus emerged were narratives of peace, redemption, and transformation. They tried to ascribe meaning to the tragedy and incorporate them into a familiar history. This narrative also influenced the commemoration practices in Hiroshima that were guided by the ideology of peace, demonstrating that its discourse of peace and transformation was the dominant manner in which the city of Hiroshima explained and remembered the bomb. The spatial reorganisation of Hiroshima has structured the topography of remembrance by containing the memories of the atomic bomb within certain sites like the Atomic Bomb Dome and the Peace Memorial Park and Museum. In reconstructing Hiroshima, the city sought not just to erase the past but to imbue the past with new meanings. Atomic bomb literature, then, emerged as a counter-narrative to these dominant narratives that saw the event as a homogeneous experience and dismissed alternative forms of remembrance.

This paper argues that atomic bomb literature countered the official narratives in two ways – first, by moving away from the sites of memory and official spaces of memorialisation, and second, by reclaiming the violence of the bombs, i.e. by functioning as a literature of atrocity. As a literature of atrocity – which was an outcome of modern violence, the violence of the gas chambers and the nuclear bombs – a-bomb literature deals with the disintegration of the human image in the face of inappropriate death. According to Edwin Shneidman (2007), a "good death" (p. 245) (appropriate death) is one which a person might choose for himself had he an option. An inappropriate death, therefore, is a sudden and discontinuous experience that threatens to reduce life to a "cruel and random event." A literature of atrocity strips death of its romantic attire and reveals man's fragile existence and the vulnerability of the flesh. The key characteristic of the literature of atrocity is the "perpetual obsession with premature or inappropriate death" (Langer, 1978, p. 65), the dehumanisation of the body, and the image of complete annihilation – of the self and the world. In the age of atrocity, writes Lawrence Langer, the image of private individual deaths has been replaced by an image of general destruction and annihilation.

Inappropriate Death in the Age of Atrocity

Nuclear weapons make individual death impossible by depriving death of its meaning, by reducing humans to radioactive ash, indistinguishable from the ashes of his home. According to Morgenthau (1961), this total annihilation of human bodies and social structures – families and societies – makes "both society and history impossible" (n.p.). Mass deaths or the

simultaneous destruction of men emphasises the quantity – the number of people killed (the more the better) – and in their final moments, turning human beings into animals who are slaughtered, their deaths rendered meaningless. The death of a hero becomes meaningful only when his death serves a purpose. For Morgenthau, the idea of an honourable death is impossible in the nuclear age because the concept of honour is valid only within a society, within a social space where the individual has membership. Nuclear weapons threaten the very existence of civilization. They make a good and honourable death impossible, so there emerges the risk of inappropriate death.

A "good death" is described as one that is appropriate not just for the person dying but also for those affected by the person's death. It is a death the survivors can "live with", one that will keep intact, or not violate, the image of the dead person. A good death is quick, painless, with no prolonged suffering, and if it happens during a heroic act, it's even better (Shneidman, 1983, p. 28). Accordingly, Shneidman's (1983) idea of an appropriate death is one that is "appropriate to the individual's time of life, to his style of life, to his situation in life…and it is appropriate to the significant others in his life" (p. 29). In the case of an appropriate death, the dying person comes to terms with his death, acknowledges it, and deals with it realistically. While Shneidman (1983) is generally referring to deaths due to sickness, his view of a good death is humane. Noting the dual and paradoxical nature of death, Shneidman (1983) states that one can only experience the death of another, never his own. In this way, our experience of death is always indirect or second-hand.

Death then has two phenomenological aspects – a private one and a public one, that is, death that one anticipates for oneself and the experience of someone else's death. Since a person can neither experience his own birth nor his death introspectively, life and death are not events; they are events only for others who are witnessing them (Shneidman, 1983, p. 56). In case of a sudden death, the pain and grief are borne by the survivor; when death is preceded by a prolonged suffering, it is the dying who has to bear the anguish (Shneidman, 1983, p. 65). In wartime Japan, the most prominent image of an appropriate (honourable) death was that of the young kamikaze pilots crashing their planes into enemy warships crying "Banzai" before dying for their emperor and country. This concept of the "noble" death was a remnant of the samurai ritual suicide called seppuku that was seen as heroic. However, in an age of atrocity, appropriate or heroic death was no longer an option.

In atomic bomb literature, the image of private death is replaced by images of mass destruction and annihilation. This new view of sudden violent death strained man's imagination as he looked for a new language to describe and give meaning to his mortality. The myths of sacrifice and martyrdom had become laughable in the face of mass death, and resistance was either impossible or futile. In the absence of a visible, easily identifiable enemy against whom victims could channel their anger and hate, the hibakushas (survivors of the atomic bomb) had nothing to fight against; instead, they chose to fight "for" peace in a nuclear-free world. This activism validated the inappropriate deaths of the original victims – those instantly obliterated by the bomb – by endowing their deaths with meaning. In Hiroshima, the looming shadow of death made the victims numb, a condition Robert Lifton (1967) called "psychic numbing." Such

paralysis of emotions and senses threatened to make the survivors less than human. Traditional symbols and images were, therefore, inadequate to represent death in the age of atrocity. In Masuji Ibuse's short story "The Crazy Iris", old symbols take on new meanings and the flowers that were once a symbol of honourable, even a preferred death, become a grotesque symbol of absurd death in the atomic age.

Events in Ibuse's story take place after Hiroshima and far from that bombed city, but the consequences of the bomb are made to transcend time and space. One morning, a woman's dead body is found floating in a pond. Beside the body is a cluster of irises. Later, it is discovered that the dead woman, who had been in Hiroshima on the day of the bombing, had witnessed the air raid in Fukuyama. Traumatised by the second event, she "went clean off the rocker" (Ibuse, 1985, p. 34). The events leading to her death can only be guessed, never confirmed.

> Perhaps, they said, the victim had been terrified by the air raid and in a fit of hysteria ran headlong from the town. Overcome by emotion, she may have leaped into the pond. Their examination of the body had revealed a burn on the cheek, which obviously lent credence to this theory (p. 33).

The death may or may not have been a delayed result of the bomb. The weapon had snapped the link that provided a clear line of progression from life to death, making the girl's death random. In the post-Hiroshima world, the iris blooming out of season becomes symbolic of a life that is snuffed out young. The "twisted stem with its belated, purple flowers" (p. 34) appears unnatural, pointing to the disruption of not only the social rhythms of life but also the natural order. The blooming of the iris is as mysterious as the girl's death. When the narrator asks his friend "Do you think that iris was frightened into bloom?" the friend answers, "It must have gone crazy!" (p. 34). The crazy iris seems an apt symbol for a death that is crazy. The sight of the flowers brings another death and another blooming iris to the narrator's mind. The setting of this other death is almost indistinguishable from the first: a house that looks out onto a pond and in the pond, a woman's body and beside it, a cluster of blooming irises.

One morning, a writer opens his window to find another girl's body floating on the pond. This girl's death is a sharp contrast to the "crazy iris" girl. The latter was found in an "old nightgown tied with a red sash," while the other girl was wearing "a beautiful kimono whose sleeves hovered on the surface of the water like the fins of a goldfish" (pp. 33–34). The kimono works as a symbol of an honourable death. An unmarried pregnant girl dying by suicide, though tragic, does not seem absurd; it even seems fitting. Her death, though its manner violent, is also gentle, but this gentleness comes from her brother's actions that turn her death into an appropriate one. His actions validate hers and suggest that dying was the only, and the right, option left to her. Ibuse Masuji's description of her death is also poignant:

> When the cabinetmaker found his sister, he knelt down by the pond and stretched out his hand to her body. He took one of her arms and gently placed it over her swollen stomach; then he took her other arm and placed it on her stomach in the same way so

> that one hand lay ceremoniously over the other and the wide sleeved covered her body. (p. 34)

His actions evoke a ritual of mourning, of gently letting go of the dead; in contrast, the "crazy iris" girl is not allowed this rite. The vision of that earlier death is already receding from the narrator's mind who cannot remember if it had been a real event ("something I had once heard") or fiction ("perhaps a part of a story") (p. 34). The two deaths represent what Hoffman calls a realistic and idealistic death – the first dominated by images of decay and the other seen as an act of transcendence, dominated by the views of eternity and immortality. The two irises in Ibuse's story represent the two images of death. Iris, in Japanese culture, traditionally represented protection and the warrior spirit. Ibuse subverts this traditional symbol, suggesting a discontinuity with the past.

This disjunction is further evident in the breakdown of law and order and familial ties in the aftermath of the bombings. Institutional authority, embodied by the Japanese Kempei military police, disintegrates following the country's defeat; their uniforms, once a symbol of power, are rendered meaningless as they fail to prevent people from stealing and instead turn a blind eye, pretending not to see anything. The breakdown of familial relationships is symbolised by the vermilion Imbe-ware water jar. The landlady refuses to part with the jar despite the narrator's several attempts to buy it off her because it had been in the woman's family since her father's days and hence was imbued with personal memories. Meanwhile, the jar is also an important relic from the narrator's childhood: "I remembered this jar standing in the same place ever since my school days" (p. 19). So, when the jar is destroyed, the landlady and the narrator both lose their ties with a past that was embodied in the water jar. The image of the jar continues to haunt the narrator, and in its loss, he sees the transient nature of beauty.

Rituals and rites that gave meaning to individual deaths were either denied, as in the case of mass deaths, or made redundant. Ceremonies and rituals give survivors closure; it assures them of the formal end of the dead person's life and the beginning of another journey by guaranteeing the possibility of spiritual transcendence. When this ritual is disrupted, survivors are left with the image of death as a random event devoid of meaning. In Hiroko Takenishi's short story "The Rite," a hibakusha woman seeks the "rite" that would enable her friends killed in the bombing to rest in peace. Death rituals allow families to gently and appropriately sever the ties with the deceased. It allows them to mourn the dead and reaffirm their own lives by reasserting their social ties. Yohko Tsuji notes that Japanese funeral rituals serve as "rites of passage to ancestorhood" (2011, p. 30). They guide the dead in their journey from "spirit" to "ancestor," and their deaths are commemorated by the future generations through the ritual of ancestor worship. In this way, the past and the future are linked by ritual mourning and commemoration. When this process is disturbed, the survivors are prevented from properly grieving the dead and reasserting their own survival. In "The Rite," Aki cannot perform the rites for her friends because she has never seen their dead bodies and hence, cannot confirm their deaths:

> Aki has never seen Kazue's dead body.
> Nor Emiko's dead body.
> No, nor Ikuko's.
> Nor has she ever come across anyone else who witnessed their end or verified the deaths of Junko or Kiyoko or Kazue or Yayoi. (p. 182)

This absence and lack of information prevents Aki from mourning them and moving on with her own life. Aki's narrative that switches between the past of Hiroshima and her present is indicative of her state of mind as she continues to revisit her past in search of answers. Takenishi suggests that the failure to recognize individual deaths has disrupted the process of grieving. Aki's friends have been buried under a "mound of black earth" with all the other dead, making their deaths indistinguishable from all those "other deaths" (p. 183). Aki notes that there are rites that are appropriate for the various ways of dying and those that befit the status of the deceased. There are funeral rites involving caskets, hearses, and funeral processions; some bury their dead in "secluded tombs," others mark the graves with rocks. Rites for the dead are performed in palaces, in tin-roofed huts, and under the stars: "There are all kinds of rites to go with death" (p. 180). Aki imagines the funeral of an Egyptian nobleman after seeing a picture of his funeral urn in a magazine.

> His loved ones left behind would have assembled before him to mourn this dead man. Some would have prayed, some would have waved incense censers, some would have made funeral offerings of great price. The lid of the alabaster urn would then have been removed and his internal organs gently placed within…There without a doubt was a fitting way to start out on death's journey, with the dead well tended and watched over by the living (p. 173).

Aki realises that there was a "secure and reassuring way to die" (p. 173). The nobleman had entrusted a part of himself (his organs kept inside the urn) to the living, and the living had, by performing the funeral rites, solemnised their link with the dead. Even Aki's friend Tomiko's unborn miscarried children had been laid to rest in small jars buried under a heap of flowers. Aki also imagines a rite for her sick friend Setsuko. After her death, there will be "the casket, the cremation, the solemn chanting of the sutras, the funeral flowers…" (p. 180). Through such ritualised activities, Setsuko will be laid to rest and once the mourners leave, life will continue. She imagines:

> In the deserted place of mourning there will be no sign of life until the garbageman appears, his hand towel round his head. He will come from the doorway and approach the altar and begin to clear away the funeral flower-wreaths (p. 180).

The lives that were disrupted by a person's death are restored to their normal rhythm and the survivors return to the land of the living. But Kazue, Emiko, and Ikuko's deaths are not "fully accomplished" because the appropriate rites of mourning have not been performed for them (p. 183). Denied the right to mourn her friends, Aki's vision of life is permeated by images of death and her encounter with it. The absent deaths of her friends reveal not only the violence

of the event, but Aki's trauma borne out of having survived the bombing, which is exacerbated by the absence of her friends and her "great anger and deep hate" that cannot find an outlet.

Cathy Caruth (1996) notes that trauma is not the story of an escape from death but its impact on the lives of the survivors. Trauma is not "known" to the survivor until it is imposed again. In its "delayed appearance," trauma reveals what was until then unknown. Trauma, hence, is a belated experience of the violence. Stories of trauma, Caruth says, oscillate between "the unbearable nature of an event" and the "unbearable nature of its survival" (p. 7). In its belatedness, trauma reveals its unique nature – the traumatic experience is not repeated after it is forgotten but it is through forgetting that it is first experienced (p. 17). Trauma resists language and memory and cannot be known except through its recurrence. This "latency" inherent in the traumatic experience creates a temporal gap and the mind recognizes the threat too little too late so that "the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again" (p. 62). Survival, then, is not the successful passage of trauma but its endless repetition.

In her flashbacks, Aki keeps revisiting the day of the bombing and the last memories of her friends. Gazing at the "vast multitude of dead", Aki tells herself this is only a "temporary phenomenon" (p. 192). The place will regain its original appearance and her friends will return, she assures herself. But the city has lost its familiarity and has become a strange place where something seems to have ended (p. 193). Takenishi reveals the tension in survivor's testimonies between absence and presence and between knowing and not knowing. In "The Rite", the collapse of traditional symbols and rituals and the structure of meaning they represented make life and death insignificant, and that is its own kind of violence. It also indicates that the peace ceremonies and commemorative practices do not offer survivors the proper channel to grieve and mourn the dead. Atomic bomb literature draws the reader's attention to images of inappropriate death, and in doing so, reveals not just the scale of destruction but the inhuman nature of death in the atomic age.

The Real Hiroshima: Unmapped Spaces of Survivors

On 6 August, Nakamura Sugimatsu was in Hiroshima constructing a fire lane when the bomb knocked him down and buried him under the debris of a building. He survived but never recovered. For years, he continued to suffer from atomic bomb disease. Life in postwar Japan was hard, food was scarce, and Sugimatsu and his six children had to rely on welfare and small jobs to survive. Sugimatsu's health was fragile; he had violent fits, and he would thrash around, crying. Several times, he tried to end his life and once, even thought of killing himself and the children. No one had answers for his baffling disease and the doctors could neither find a reason for his illness nor a cure. For over eight years (1953–1960), photographer Fukushima Kikujiro documented the life of Nakamura Sugimatsu and his family. Sugimatsu wanted Kikujiro to record every detail of his life and show to the world the pain a hibakusha had to live through day after day (Yuki, 2011). The photos are an intimate portrayal of the despair of a sick man and the gradual disintegration of a family. One photo shows Sugimatsu, his ribs protruding out of his thin body, only wearing a loincloth and squatting on his futon. Another shows him, his back turned to the camera, scratching a wooden fence as he waits for the pain to subside. A

photo of him suffering a violent fit while his daughter runs out of the room, and another one of him leaning out of a window, in despair, are deeply personal images of private moments of pain and anguish. Kikujiro photographed Sugimatsu sick at home, his body distorted by pain and marked by scars from wounds he had inflicted on himself. These images contradict the images of the safe spaces in official commemorative sites at the Hiroshima Peace Park. This is done by locating hibakusha bodies within their lived spaces that are often filled with anguish and desperation.

After the bombing, the reclaiming of the city was important for the symbolic rebirth of the survivors and their reintegration into society. Critical to this rebirth was the process of forging human bonds and reasserting human relations that had been severed by the bomb (Lifton, 1967, p. 90). Survivors who had fled the city in the aftermath of the bombing returned to reclaim their territory and reaffirm the ties between "self and dwelling place" (p. 92). But their return, Lifton notes, was also tied to their unwillingness to abandon the dead. In the physical space of Hiroshima, survivors battled with their death guilt and anxiety. Rumours that Hiroshima would be unliveable for seventy-five years due to radiation were proved wrong as shanties quickly mushroomed in the atomic ruins within months of the bombing. According to Francesco Comotti (2017), the transformation of the human environment from a safe space to one of violence was paralleled in the body and the psyche of the survivor. The survivor's life became so intertwined with images of death that it was impossible for them to leave the place where trauma was continuously reenacted (p. 271).

Writer Yoko Ota keeps returning to her city, where she witnessed the bomb, and with every visit the city keeps changing into a strange, alien place. A "strange landscape" was emerging out of the ruins and anything that was out of place in this new urban space, like the "miserable roadside stands", were pushed to the margins (1989, p. 67). There is a tension between personal and public spaces in Ota's fiction. In her short story "Fireflies," Ota juxtaposes the new Hiroshima, inhabited by men and women full of vitality, with the dreary homes of sick hibakushas. The hibakushas inhabit a liminal place and exist in makeshift shacks and huts, spaces situated on the margins. Ota's "Fireflies" (1985) and "Residues of Squalor" (1989) are both located in the makeshift shacks that were built on the former military parade ground. The shacks were home to atomic bomb survivors, expatriates, and former soldiers – all of them living on the margins.

Ota's sister Teiko and her family lived in one of these shacks that could neither be called a home nor a temporary place of residence. The shack was "temporary", yet Teiko had been living there for seven years. No inhabitant had managed to move out of the shacks, suggesting not only postwar economic hardship but perhaps also the association of survivors with sites of trauma. Ota (1985) remarks on the unusual nature of the place:

> The place she lived in was not what you would normally call a "house". I don't know the right word for it—a shack, a barrack, some kind of little living unit appropriate to this devastated city (p. 88).

The location of these dwellings, the former military parade ground, also illustrates the entrapment of survivors – whether voluntary or involuntary – in the past, indicating that their lives were never freed from the memories of the bombing. The place was at once an area of renewal and a site of limbo, with the survivors forever caught between the history of the place and their own present. The temporary nature of these dwellings contests the very idea of "home" as the stability they provide is only transient. This is in sharp contrast to the fixed and sacred space of the Hiroshima Peace Park that provides a structure of meaning to the divergent memories and experiences of survivors. The narrative of transformation and renewal that are embodied in these official memorial spaces find no place in the domestic spaces of hibakushas. Their homes provide no haven from their traumatic memories which, like the slugs that infest their shacks, threaten to invade their homes; the slugs then become a metaphor for the atomic memories:

> A bunch of blood relations was asleep scrunched up under one mosquito net, each shouldering a misfortune that was unthinkable in normal situations; on that net a group of slugs, also unthinkable in normal times, was creeping around (1989, p. 56).

The houses had little protection from the rain and winds and during the rainy season, slugs bred under the rotting floors. In an attempt to get rid of the slugs, Ota's mother and sister dropped them in salt water, but their melted bodies looked like "human beings heaped up in a mound of death, half burnt but not completely melted" (1989, p. 57). Ota, unable to bear the sight, sprinkled DDT around the house to prevent the slugs from entering – "The slugs would run away, I thought" – but this proved to be a more cruel solution than salt water as the DDT melted the "soft bodies of the slugs" (1989, p. 58). Looking at their melting and glistening bodies, Ota immediately returns to the day of the bombing: "I had to forget the presence of the slugs as quickly as possible. It was because I recalled the groups of humans massacred seven years ago" (p. 58). At this moment, she takes on the role of both the victim (of the bomb) and the victimizer, indicating survivors' guilt and death anxiety. DDT was one of the tools the Americans used to sanitise Japanese bodies. After the war, acute food shortage and lack of medical infrastructure led to rampant spread of disease in the Japanese countryside. To prevent epidemics, the American occupying forces launched vaccination programs and resorted to using DDT. The Japanese were sprayed with the powder at schools, hospitals, and other public places; it was often a humiliating experience (Igarashi, 2000, p. 67). For many, DDT became an enduring symbol of Japan's defeat. Ota's use of DDT then takes on a symbolic meaning as she uses the tool of the victor to get rid of the slugs that invade her domestic space. The sight of the melting slugs, however, make her nauseous and she covers their slimy bodies with a newspaper, thus averting her gaze from the massacre she has caused. But even as she turns away, memories of the bombing, nudged by the sight of the melting slugs, resurface. To Ota, the slugs seem to represent the souls of dead soldiers killed in the parade ground.

The "home" is also located in a site of trauma, a place where hundreds had died while fleeing the bomb. The bones of the dead buried on the parade ground threaten to come out and confront the survivors, indicating that the memories of the bomb lie just underneath the surface. Ota's

younger brother Tetsuji was among those killed at the present site where the homes for the bombed had cropped up. But his death was never discussed in the family.

> We did not want to wake the wailing that had sunk to the bottom of our hearts. Even among blood relatives, people refrained from talking about their grief and shed unbearable tears, perhaps in bed, when the world was quietly asleep. (1989, p. 60)

The silence of the survivors reveals their attempt to distance themselves from the event.

Conclusion

Despite claims of the universality of nuclear victimhood, the hibakushas have suffered alone, shedding "unbearable tears" in their beds while the world slept. Even those who had witnessed the bombing together were divided by their grief. It is the most private space – the bed – that becomes the site of personal grieving, suggesting that the official sites of commemoration do not offer survivors the space to heal and grieve; it only aids the process of remembering the bombing. In Ota's stories, the readers view Hiroshima through the eyes of a victim, and in doing so, the city takes on a new meaning, one that is divorced from the peace narrative enshrined in the cityscape. Like photographer Kikujiro's deeply personal photos of Sugimatsu, these stories are intimate portrayals of the private spaces of the hibakushas, ones imbued by the personal memories of the bomb.

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