

〈論文〉

## **Literary Creations of the Japanese Diaspora: The Rewriting of Japanese Folktales in Lee Ann Roripaugh's Poetry**

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In *Beyond Heart Mountain* (1999) and *Year of the Snake* (2004), contemporary Japanese American poet, Lee Ann Roripaugh, represents the Japanese/Japanese American experience, self, and identity, focusing particularly on her body in her imaginative and memoiristic poetry. In the exploration of her body and identity in both works, and introducing images that represent Japanese culture, she associates herself with female characters through Japanese folktales. By rewriting these folktales, she explores and expresses Japanese American culture, an ambivalent self-image, and a sense of connection with nature. Her personal experience and creative exploration of her body, self, and identity through the literary reconstruction of folktales make her writing particularly diasporic, linking it to the larger context of the Japanese American experience, memory, and culture.

A folktale is a prose story that has been transmitted orally through many generations. Folktales often contain elements of myths and legends that have been transformed by traveling from culture to culture. Japanese folktales and mythology are part of a very complex system of beliefs. The Shinto pantheon includes more than 8,000 gods and spirits. Despite the influence of ancient Chinese civilization, most Japanese mythologies and folktales are said to be original. They are deeply influenced by Shinto and Buddhist traditions as well as the folk beliefs of farmers. Most Japanese myths and folktales are derived from two books: *Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters)* and *Nihonshyoki (Chronicles of Japan)*. *Kojiki* means “the record of past things” and is

the oldest known Japanese book of myths, legends, and history, while *Nihonsyoki* is the second oldest book.

Japanese folktales are characterized by their legends and localities.<sup>1</sup> Although comparative research into Western folktales indicates that Japanese folktales are legendary, those stories were long believed to be true. Japanese folktales have deep roots in their localities and have been orally transmitted in the home and local dialects. The snake-bridegroom tale is believed to have happened in an actual place in the mountains and ponds where the story was told (Inada 11). For centuries, Japanese folk traditions remained impervious to foreign influences even though Japan experienced several waves of immigration. Besides Shintoism and Buddhism, Japanese folktales are greatly influenced by the folk beliefs that preceded and still underlie these religions. These beliefs are expressed in seasonal and communal customs and festivals that honor a variety of local deities in nature, express taboos, and calm evil spirits in an agricultural society. Today, in rural Japan, many people still follow the beliefs and traditional ways of life (Dorson 22). In recent years, more people have been interested in rediscovering Japanese folktales. This trend is due to the rapid modernization and globalization of Japanese society. Many people, consciously and unconsciously, wish to find their identity through traditional folktales because folktales tell many things about a country's history and culture (Kawai 275). In other words, folktales are a source of collective and national identity.

In the United States, folktales, according to Jan Harold Brunvand, highlight the country's rich multicultural heritage. He states that American multiculturalism variously contributes to its folklore culture in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Therefore, the U.S. is a site in which foreign folklores meet as well as a place to witness old traditions and the rise of new ones (61-62).

Lee Ann Roripaugh has assumed a significant role in this trend through her contemporary rewriting of Japanese folktales. Her stories are cultural hybrids that incorporate a contemporary Japanese American woman's view of traditional Japanese tales. Her works are "literary constructions of traditional and emergent cultures" (Preston xiii).

Since the late twentieth century, in order to rediscover history, feminist writers have recreated literature and have given a voice to characters who were previously

silent and passive. Her works can be positioned as feminist writings, in that, she rewrites and rediscovers Japanese history by incorporating contemporary Japanese American women's views. Her empathetic interpretation of the female characters in these stories gives depth to them.

A modernist writer, Hilda Doolittle based her "Eurydice" on a Greek myth about the poet, Orpheus, and his wife, Eurydice, who died and was carried to Hades. In the original story, Orpheus tries to bring her back by the power of his songs, but he loses her because he turned to look at her—something he was not supposed to do. Doolittle imaginatively incorporates a feminist view and gives the passive and silent Eurydice a voice with which she blames Orpheus' egoism:

So you have swept me back,  
I who could have walked with the live souls  
Above the earth,  
I who could have slept among the live flowers  
at last;

so for your arrogance  
and your ruthlessness  
I am swept back  
where dead lichens drip  
dead cinders upon moss of ash:<sup>2</sup>

Cognizant that there are many female figures in the stories of Greek and Roman mythology, as well as the rewriting of these characters by contemporary female writers, Diane Purkiss finds that by the rewriting of myths, women writers strategically engage in the literary tradition. These mythical characters who had been silenced and objectified in many previous narratives were subsequently endowed with voices and identities (445). Though not in an enraged manner as in Doolittle's work, Roripaugh borrows from Japanese folktales and creates her own stories by incorporating a feminist perspective. In third-person narratives, she gives a first-person point of view and voice to females (animals and heavenly maidens) who were

originally silent. As modernist women writers concerned with “herstory” who have excavated females from literature, Roripaugh presents Japanese folktales from both a feminist and Japanese American perspective.

She presents two famous Japanese folktales about snakes in their original titles, “Snake Wife” and “Snake Bridegroom”. As discussed in the previous chapter on Roripaugh’s first book of poetry, *Year of the Snake*, her second poetry collection indicates that she was born in the year of the snake, according to the Chinese zodiac calendar, and that she has a particular connection and empathy toward images of snakes. She presents an ambivalent self-image of her body by associating herself with snakes, which symbolize transcendence, the space between life and death, and the conscious and unconscious. By examining the images of snakes in both cultures, her self-image is ambivalent and elusive just as the images of snakes have been historically fluctuating and ambivalent. Her work demonstrates a special self-reflection of the images of snakes.

Gregory McNamee points out that there are many folktales around the world about snakes. The attraction of snakes is universal as “we are primates combining a native fear of snakes with a strange fascination for them” (xiii). Fear inspires people to sing songs about snakes about which folktales are produced (xiii). Marilyn Nissenson and Susan Jonas have a similar idea about the image of snakes as having the ability to continuously evoke fear and fascination in people, assuming that “we retain the awe inspired by the ancient alliance between snakes and the elemental forces of life and death” (26). They explore the imagery of snakes in both the traditional and contemporary worlds of art in *Snake Charm*:

The snake insinuates itself into human consciousness at the beginning of time. Snakes are among our earliest gods. They were believed to mediate between life and death, earth and sky, this world and the next.... Snakes are symbols of seduction and betrayal, omen of disease and death.... Snakes have no differentiated body parts—no neck or limbs. Their eyes never close, and their expressions do not change. They are cold-blooded. They have a forked tongue. Baby snakes have no charm; they look like their parents, only smaller. Snakes are hard to anthropomorphize. They are mysterious, remote—the Other. (19)

Roripaugh reflected on herself and body in “Snake Song,” and the snake tales she recreates are among the most popular in old Japanese folktales. Her first-person narrative works on snake tales, “Snake Wife” and “Snake Bride-groom,” express sympathy and compassion toward snakes.

The “Snake Wife” follows the original story of “Hebi Nyobo” though it shifts the center to the female character’s perspective. As she wrote in “Snake Song,” she associates herself particularly with the image of a snake. In “Snake Wife,” she vividly and empathetically writes about a female snake/human character and her body: “From the very start, you were charmed/by the uncoiling/languor of my shifting poses,/by the sibilant/lisp of silk sliding down my un-/dulant length of spine/as I shed the intricate layers/of my kimono” (55). The female snake/human character’s body and physical senses are articulate. The snake wife elaborately describes her mysterious appearance and body as well as her physical pain. The poet regards her female character’s life and fate with compassion: “And because you had seen/me as my true self,/I plucked out one of my own eyes/to give to our child/to suckle, and then I left you” (57-58).

In “Snake Bride-groom,” the poet turns abomination toward snakes into love, also seeing snakes as part of her imagined self.

He was willow-thin, so  
elegant in  
pale green robes of the most exquisite silk,  
  
that smelled sweetly,  
as if from the scent of freshly crushed leaves.  
I could not see  
  
his face in the shadows, but he whispered  
strange and lovely  
things to me until my eyelids quivered,  
  
slid shut in sleep,  
and when I awoke in the morning, he was

already gone (*Snake Bride-groom* 21-22).

In the original folktale, the snake-bridegroom, threaded by a needle, is found in a cave with his mother. The snake is about to die and the conversation between him and his mother is overheard. He tells his mother that despite his portending death, he remains satisfied because the girl will bear his children. His mother points out that because humans are clever, if the girl drinks sake at a festival, his children will not survive. Upon hearing this, the bride escapes from giving birth to the snake's children. The snake is a deity for water in Japan's agricultural society. The serpent-bridegroom folktale portrays an ancient form of marriage, generally called *tsumadoi-kon*. This marriage form began in the Heian period (794-1185) and was practiced until as recently as the mid-twentieth century in some rural areas in Japan. In this form of marriage, the man comes at night to the woman's room to court her, and if she does not reject him, they consummate their relationship. Although the woman's parents are aware of these nightly visits, they remain silent. Only after their daughter appears to be with child do they enquire about the man. The parents permit the marriage, and the husband continues to make nightly visits to his wife in her home.

Keigo Seki argues that the snake tale of *tsumadoi-kon* reflects the traditions of a matrilineal society in which the mother has more influence than the father as to their daughter's marriage. It is also the mother who tells the female character how to find out more about her mysterious visitor. This further indicates that the serpent-bridegroom folktale reflects social conditions existing under the matrilineal system in ancient Japan (Seki 279-80). Roripaugh's use of her female character's love for the male snake character changed the original story and ended it dramatically. The female character's physical senses are also well described in this poem, particularly when she talks about the transformation of her body due to pregnancy and the feeling of the snake's children moving inside her: "I could feel my womb twisting and writhing,/ full of serpents,/ until one day it was too much for me/to bear. I stabbed/myself with a chopstick/ and set them free/to slither out/where my restless spirit could follow them/ through grass and trees,/back up into the mountains..." (23-24). Her snake babies are part of her, and she dreams of love between her and the snake. As she explores her body and reflects on the image of a snake, her physical senses described in these poems

can be interpreted as the writer's own imaginary bodily experience. The author's self-reflection is notable here from her love of the snake-bridegroom and children as a part of the female character's body and spirit.

The female character expresses love toward the snake-bridegroom even after discovering his true nature. Her love for the bridegroom shows a connection with the snake in opposition to the abomination presented in the original story. As Nissenson and Jonas found, the snake tales account for "primordial associations of snakes with sexuality, fertility, and death were revived by discoveries in archaeology, depth psychology, and comparative mythology," (26) and Roripaugh enhances these associations in her work.

Roripaugh chose the most common and popular tales of hybrid marriage from Japanese folktales. As her work and reputation as a nature writer indicate, her interest in and attraction to Japanese folktales seem to come not only from her search for identity as an American of Japanese origin, but also from her deep relationship with nature. Her rewriting of Japanese folktales is also characterized by her association with nature. She explores the bodies and physical senses of female characters, especially in her snake folktales, which results in a portrayal of her affiliation with nature.

Tales of hybrid marriages are common in folktales around the world, but Japanese hybrid marriage tales are unique. Yuko Amamiya explains that although the theme of hybrid marriage was very popular in French and German folktales in the Middle Ages, they became rarer in Western countries under the influence of Christianity, which rejected supernatural powers that did not come from God, as these were seen as evil, such as witchcraft. Therefore, although there are many hybrid marriage tales existing worldwide across space and time, Japanese hybrid marriage tales remain unique (515). Hybrid marriage relationships take place between animals and humans and celestial maidens and humans. In most Japanese hybrid marriage tales, the non-human characters are female. These characters, disguised as beautiful females, come to the homes of males to marry them. In some cases, they are simply evil, but most female characters come to repay past kindness from male characters. Female characters often bring wealth to the home. However, marital bliss is short-lived and ends as the husband ignores his wife's warnings and discovers who she really is.

As Hayao Kawai points out, in hybrid marriage folktales in other countries, transformations from human to non-human and vice versa are usually the result of a wizard's/witch's magic; however, Japanese non-human characters always transform themselves. Therefore, compared with other countries, Japanese folktales reveal people's closer positioning of themselves to nature and natural living (211-12). Kawai also finds that compared with Western folktales that are dominated by a patriarchal consciousness, Japanese folktales are dominated by a matriarchal consciousness (293). Historically, Japanese culture has emphasized coexistence rather than confrontation with nature. The manner in which female characters transform relationships with male characters points to Roripaugh's deep sense of connection and affiliation with nature, and this is apparent in her works.

Roripaugh's creative rewriting is also distinctive, in that, she incorporates the Western concept of romantic love into Japanese traditional folktales that did not originally allude to this concept. In Japanese folktales, marriage and relationships are not often based on affection and are thought to rather take place out of necessity. In her works, female characters are subjective, passionate and emotional about their relationships, unlike the original characters. Roripaugh treats interactions between animals and humans as well as celestial beings and humans as romantic, which is often associated with Western literary (folkloric) tradition. Thus, her creative imagination gives life to her female characters and transforms original Japanese folktales into cultural hybrid texts.

In Roripaugh's "Snake Bride-groom," she turns snake-human interaction into a romantic love relationship. Her other hybrid marriage works originate from recreated folktales, such as "Tongue-Cut Sparrow" and "Orihime's Song." Most of the female characters in Japanese folktales are passive and marry out of necessity and then participate in domestic and agricultural work in traditional Japanese society. Thus, Roripaugh's female characters appear liberated as they pursue their emotion, love, and sexuality.

Once I was a sparrow  
caught trespassing in your back garden  
and you made me your pet,



feeding me satin seeds of tear-shaped  
sesame from the tip  
of your finger, blowing your warm breath

in the tender hollows  
beneath the curve of my wings (*Tongue-Cut Sparrow* 50)

The original story, “Shita-kiri Suzume,” differs from Roripaugh’s poetry in that a romantic relationship does not occur between the sparrow and the male character who is actually an old man. After the angry wife cuts the sparrow’s tongue, the old man goes in search of the bird. On the way, the old man encounters people enduring difficult and unpleasant circumstances such as drinking buckets of water used to wash horses, cows and filthier things. After these hardships, he finally finds the sparrow. When he leaves, he is given a choice of a light or heavy box. He chooses the lighter one to bring home and later finds out that it contains many treasures. His cruel and greedy wife wants the treasures to herself. When given the choice of boxes, she chooses the heavy one. After neglecting the sparrow’s warning, she is killed when she opens the box full of monsters. In “Tongue-Cut Sparrow,” the female sparrow seeks a romantic relationship and is seductive as well as emotional toward the male character. The tongue, a body part, is used here to express physical pain as well as emotional strength. When the tongue is cut, the pain the sparrow experiences is vivid: “your wife snatched me up and cut out/my tongue with gardening/shears—the hot, sudden taste of rust, blood/and silence blossoming/in my mouth like a red peony” (50). After seeing his greed and punishing him, she acquires herself a new life by growing her new tongue, which enables her to have a voice: “I grew a new, tough tongue,/and finally set myself free” (52). Her new tongue symbolizes freedom and liberates her from failed love in this poetry.

In “Orihime’s Song,” a part of “Star Festival,” though the original story “Tennin Nyobo,” (“Celestial Wife”) is relatively similar in its treatment of a love relationship, Roripaugh adds to it and fills the story with passion. In the original story, the young male character sees celestial maidens bathing in a lake. He steals the special feathered cloth of one of the maidens, and she marries him as she cannot fly back

without the cloth. She has three children with him, but she escapes with her children when she finds the feathered cloth. He follows her up to the sky. However, he fails in his attempts to have her back, and they are separated by a celestial river (Milky Way) and are only allowed to meet once annually on July 7. In Roriphaugh's poetry, the celestial maiden, Orihime, speaks of passionate and erotic desire for her lover even though she was not willing to marry him in the original story. Her eagerness to unite with her lover is characterized as romantic love, metaphorically speaking of the act of drinking and ingestion into her body:

"I burn alone, but know you/feel my warmth, understand./And for this one night I am/a woman and you will row across/the Milky Way to me. Impatient/to feel your fingers touch/my face, your mouth drink me,/to have you inside me again" (56). Richard White explains the romantic love that writers such as John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelly explored:

To abandon control of one's body in sex is to experience the physical correlate of this emotional and spiritual yielding...the physical and the spiritual aspects of the lovers' relationship are completely interwoven with each other; the one becomes a symbol for the other, and eternity is achieved through physical union with the beloved. For the romantic, this is the existential significance of sexual experience. What is most important here, however, is not the erotic ecstasy itself, but the complete and unmediated co-presence of the one with the other that this involves. (58)

The love that Roripaugh writes about in her poetry is the romantic love of fusion in the Western literary tradition. By incorporating the concept of romantic love into traditional Japanese folktales, she turns her writings into cultural hybrids. Moreover, she incorporates a feminist perspective into Japanese folktales and rewrites female figures as having the ability to pursue their love and sexuality as well as to punish unkindness. In the original version, in contrast, these women were passive and silent.

Alesia García discusses the significance of rewriting folklore/myth by analyzing the contemporary works of Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman" (in *Storyteller*) and Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" (in *Woman Hollering Creek*). Sandra Cisneros creatively transforms the stories as a feminist narrative by liberating and empowering the female protagonists (109). García positions that these writers

seriously consider the significance of heritage and issues of identity in writings (3). In this context, these narratives performatively engage in continuing the tradition of the storytelling of their cultures (4). It is significant to acknowledge that they resist oppressions by incorporating new experiences and continuing to recontextualize their stories (4). Roripaugh is also one of these contemporary writers who attempts to recontextualize and retells her stories from feminist perspectives.

In examining her selections of Japanese folktales, she chooses popular and common ones with a female animal character repaying kindness. These female characters change into humans and then change back to their original forms. When the male characters discover that these females are not human, they quietly leave with a sense of sadness. The males are never punished in Japanese folktales for ignoring warnings. Therefore, in this common storyline, female animals are passive and silent as well as tragic figures.

Kawai asserts that hybrid marriage tales are women's stories as females are the ones who choose to marry, bring wealth, and divorce when they are discovered to be non-human (201-2). However, female characters cater to the needs of males and are far from being active or subjective in the original stories. In addition to her female characters subjectively pursuing their lovers and sexuality, Roripaugh also gives them agency to punish unkindness.

In "Tongue-Cut Sparrow," the sparrow repays the male character's kindness by giving him a box "filled/with freshwater pearls, slippery to touch,/and green like the color of tea" (51). Then, she turns on him when he seems to greedily come for another box by giving him one that was "crammed/full of sparrows' tongues, mouse/ droppings, and pure-white poisonous snakes" (51). Similarly, Roripaugh's poetry "Fish Wife" is based on a Japanese folktale, but its revengeful ending is quite different from the original "Uo Nyobo."

One day, the male character catches a fish and releases her back into the water. Later, when he discovers that a woman he married is a fish who makes delicious soup from her body, he angrily tells her to leave his house. Then she explains that she is the fish whose life he had saved, and consequently she leaves the house as she cannot stay with him once the secret is revealed. Yuko Amamiya points to the matriarchal consciousness seen in Japanese folktales, such as "Fish Wife," in their

power of reproduction. She analyzes that the fear of women's ability of reproduction is overwhelming, which leads to the story to an unhappy ending (519).

However, in this poetry, the fish wife is as subjective as other female characters in Roripaugh's works. She comes to him to repay kindness, but then turns her back on him when he becomes suspicious of her true identity: "I knew that you'd/begun to spy when you refused/to eat my soup,/the one you used to think was/so delicious" (66). This is again the basic plot of Japanese folktales in which females in a hybrid marriage sadly leave when they are discovered as non-human. Whereas in Western folktales, male characters who ignore warnings are punished, in Japanese folktales, they are usually not. However, in Roripaugh's "Fish Wife," the female character punishes the male character for doubting her. She then makes him suffer even more by giving him a box full of evil things: "Before I left/I gave you a lacquerware box/so heavy you'd think/it would be worth my weight in gold./I packed it/full of earth worms and damsel flies,/bumblebee wings,/and gleaming coils of fine, silk twine (65-66).

Ethel Johnston Phelps finds, in her research on heroines in folktales around world, that traditional fairy/folktales are heavily focused on heroes. Heroines are always endowed with beauty as if it were the only reason for their existence. They are "good, obedient, meek, submissive to authority, and naturally inferior to the heroes" even though they suffer from cruelty and ill-treatment (ix-x). In this sense, in "Tongue-Cut Sparrow" and "Fish Wife," Roripaugh subverts the figure of the heroine that Phelps explains.

Susan Sellers talks about contemporary women writers' use of myth/fairytales. She describes that one of the reasons for using myth lies in its power. She analyzes that women writers "need to deploy myth's power, weaving our own version onto its potent templates to attain the maximum effect" (31). Diane Purkiss also describes the meanings that contemporary women writers attach to rewriting myths:

For feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth's disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a

‘negative’ female role-model becomes a positive one. (441-42)

The process of rewriting myths gives contemporary women writers the space for identification by changing the narrative and the position of the speaker (444).

Roripaugh’s works are the writings of the Japanese diaspora, which examine language, myth, symbol and image through Japanese folktales. Roripaugh explores a live body as well as an imagined body through female characters in Japanese folktales as she weaves through her identity as a Japanese American. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur describe the development of the concept of diaspora in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*. The concept of diaspora has been recently expanded to include East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Asia Pacific, the Caribbean, South America, Latin America, Africa, and Central Europe: “the term moved from essentialist notions of homeland, national or ethnic identity, and geographical location to deployments of diaspora conceptualized in terms of hybridity, *métissage*, heterogeneity” (5-6). By this shift in diaspora studies, diasporas have achieved significant space from which to reconsider issues of race, ethnicity, nation, and identity. They discuss that “thinking about different diasporas in transnational settings offers an alternative paradigm for national (or multinational, transnational, and even postnational) identification” (8). They provide questions for current and future studies of diaspora as follows:

How will their memories of the homeland, marked by ambivalence and contradiction, operate? How will they relate to the cultural heritage of their parents? Will they reject aspects of the home country culture? Will they embrace other aspects? What types of alliances will they seek to establish? To fruitfully analyze such questions and problematic dynamics, diaspora studies will need to move beyond theorizing how diasporic identities are constructed and consolidated and must ask, how are these diasporic identities practiced, lived, and experienced? (8-9)

The major theme in Roripaugh’s creative works centers on her questioning herself about issues such as diasporic subjectivity. Through the use and rewriting of Japanese folktales, she seeks an identity in Japanese history, culture, and experience. She creatively explores her imagined body, emotion, love, and sexuality through female characters in Japanese folktale legends. She makes the characters alive and subjective in the present by incorporating a Japanese American woman writer’s view of female

characters. Thus, her creative literary construction enables her to turn Japanese folktales into a contemporary woman's writings about the Japanese diaspora.

#### Notes

1. For the descriptions of Japanese folktales in this chapter, see Ikeda (1971) and Kawaii (1985, 2002)
2. Part 1 of 8 from *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, 1412-1413.

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