

《Treatise》

## Politics of Identities : Narratives of Invisible Signifier in Japan (2)

### Exploring *The River with No Bridge*

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#### Introduction

In the previous paper, I have examined how Japan rhetorically produces its monoethnic image. I now turn to analyze Sue Sumii's *The River with No Bridge* in which, I will argue, one of the Buraku children observes how society reconstructs "Japanese-ness." *The River with No Bridge* presents a time in which Japan's hegemonic cultural forces construct national identity as they construct monoethnicity. Just as the monoethnic image of Japan occludes racial minorities, so the cultural identity of Japanese-ness occludes sub-cultural differences, such as gender, class, and race. This literary work thus operates in two cultural contexts: first, in a narrower political context in which the government attempts to unify the country by denying differences that social hierarchy creates and by emphasizing the concept of Imperial culture; and second, the novel operates in a broad political context. It depicts Japan's crisis of identity formation as a politically constructed hegemonic society torn by minority discrimination which finds its most powerful expression in class relations. In its most important move, the novel unifies these levels and emerges as a sweeping political critique that demonstrates how problems of difference are fundamentally constructed through language.

## Narratives of Social Class Identities

Set between the years 1908 and 1924, *The River with No Bridge* mirrors the turmoil of the Meiji era and its treatment of Buraku-min children who are directly affected by the government's bureaucratic (dis)orientation. It features children and their families living in an outcast village called "Komori" in Nara Prefecture, the ancient cultural center of Japan. Although Komori and its residents are fictional, Sumii draws upon her own childhood experience in the area and places that form the novel's background. *The River with No Bridge*, then, is based on the actual history of Japan's caste practice. Until their legal emancipation, the Buraku-min, including the Komori people, are called "eta," or "much filth." Racially no different from other Japanese, they are considered hereditarily "unclean" because of the occupations assigned to them in society, such as burying the dead and disposing of slaughtered animal remains—occupations considered untouchable according to Buddhist belief. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) in particular, eta were strictly segregated from the rest of society. A rigid class system was adapted, separating the warrior, farmer, artisan, and merchant strata of society, in descending order of status. The eta and hinin were excluded from four classes of society in the same way the untouchables of India were by the caste system. The eta were discriminated against and forced to live, work, and dress in a way that set them clearly apart from others. They were even prohibited to come in contact with people of the other strata of society. With the downfall of the shogunate and imperial restoration in 1868, Japan set about to rebuild itself as a modern state. In 1871, the Meiji administration issued an emancipation edict, abolishing the use of the terms "eta" and "hinin" and announcing that the status and occupation of those lower- than-the-lowest of classes should be treated equally with those of the commoners (former farmers, artisans, and merchants). However, the government set up a new class system composed of the peerage, descendants

of former samurai, and the commoners. The status of the former eta and hinin was clearly recorded in the household registers as new commoners, and this perpetuated the discrimination against them.

In *The River with No Bridge*, Sumii particularly concerns herself with political motives behind a particular political orientation and reveals the crucial inconsistency behind the Meiji Administration's "orientation." While the government attempts to conceptualize Japanese national identity by eliminating the barriers of class hierarchies, it disguises its political motive. Sumii articulates that the government has no intention to alter the Komori's status as cultural outsiders and therefore that political "orientation" is in effect "disorientation." Because of this "disorientation," the majority's attitudes towards the Buraku-min do not keep pace with the change in their legal status.

The discrimination against these outcasts is frequently discussed in terms of limited job opportunities and difficulties finding marriage partners. The Komori make every effort to eke out a living as farmers. And for children, it is often in school that they suffer the worst treatment, which stems from such negative preconceptions. Like anyone who is born in Komori, Koji Hatanaka, the protagonist of the novel, endures severe social discrimination. Set in 1908, the novel depicts six-year-old Koji's experiences of social discrimination in order to expose his lifelong emotional scars inflicted on a small segment of the Japanese population simply by an accident of birth. The novel depicts Koji's earlier life (about six years) in which he struggles to free himself from the bonds of discrimination.

Through Koji's experiences and his own reflections on them, Sumii demonstrates two contrary forms of discrimination against the Buraku-min: the socially practiced, explicit discrimination by a dominant people; and the implicit discrimination of a government that changes the title of the Buraku-min but only to maintain their identity as eta. The first kind plays a part in a historical and cultural account of how the dominant people discriminate

against the Buraku-min; the second consists of rhetorical reflections on political discrimination. In the earlier chapters in the novel, when Koji is in the lower grades, Sumii clearly portrays Koji's suffering in order to reveal the explicit form of discrimination as an ordinary social practice. The significance of social discrimination can perhaps be seen most clearly in the non-Buraku children's attempting to avoid any physical contact with Komori children. Most obviously, Koji and others all have to sit together in the classroom and in the playground, while being called "dirty," or "Filthy eta" by the non-Buraku children.

The Buraku children are victimized by the non-Buraku children and teachers, who enforce the difference between themselves and the Buraku-min by articulating that eta-ness makes anything and everyone in Komori dirty and polluted. Sumii considers this discriminatory practice in relation to other cultural forces, particularly politics, as well as its bearing on the traditional hierarchical culture of Japan. Searching for the definition of national identity, the novel presents Koji's fundamental questions: What makes Komori people eta?; What makes the Buraku-min different from the majority of Japanese? The later chapters of *The River with No Bridge*, presenting an older Koji, illustrate his detection of this political rhetoric that calls society to maintain its present order—rhetoric disseminated in political discourse designed to be indoctrinated in school. He declares at the end of the book, "Everybody's naked when they're born, even the Emperor, even eta," while realizing that the death of Koji's father fighting in the Emperor's name during the Russo-Japanese War does not exempt his family from discrimination. Thus, Koji's encounter with social discrimination by other non-Buraku people will later allow him to discover its political implications. Sumii presents Koji's discovery as a critical point in *The River with No Bridge*, to the effect that, even though discrimination is historically based, its "force" originates in and is maintained by a governmental orientation. This orientation draws on the

political intention to establish a unified and modernized Japan that can still be associated with the ostensibly discarded Imperial culture.

### **The Presence of “otherness”**

Although each chapter interrogates Koji’s understanding of the two kinds of discrimination, I will analyze each historical/cultural and political account of discrimination in the order of their appearance in the novel. The first kind of discrimination consists in what Koji comes to regard as the social practice of discrimination. This discrimination is evident in the novel’s passages in which a character questions the non-Buraku-min’s rhetorical articulation of his identity. Early in the novel, we see how conceptions of difference arise from complex interactions between cultural assumptions and the presence of “otherness.” In relying on historical and cultural assumptions, the non-Buraku people regard “eta-ness” as a significant element of the Buraku-min. This “proper name,” “eta,” is for the Komori people, the one constituted by ideology that belongs in both the vocabularies of “the minority and the majority,” or “the oppressed and the oppressors.” The signifier of the minority (eta) and signified of the minority (the Buraku-min) depend on “otherness” and its articulation determines the attitude non-Buraku-min take.

One of the non-Buraku children, for example, reinforces society’s perspective of discriminatory “otherness” by ridiculing a Buraku-min family’s act of kindness. When the non-Buraku children in the primary school laugh about the fact that Koji’s family has steamed some sweet potatoes for the soldiers camping on the river bank, a non-Buraku child, Senkichi, draws the line between ordinary people and people from Komori. He explains why the soldiers were pleased with some hot potatoes on such a cold night:

“Those soldiers are from the Nagoya division,” said Senkichi,

speaking with deliberate slowness. “They don’t know these parts. D’you think they’d have eaten the potatoes if they’d known you’re from Komori?”

While Koji’s family was seen by the soldiers—themselves cultural outsiders—as an ordinary family that kindly brought over hot potatoes, known as a Komori family, they would be characterized differently. We see how objects touched by the Komori assume polluted qualities. Senkichi’s emphasis on the soldier’s unfamiliarity with the region articulates how the Komori people’s status changes in relation to the dominant people’s presumed norms.

Though Senkichi thinks he is simply clarifying the reason the soldiers took the potatoes, in fact he is perpetuating prejudice against the Burakumin. Presuming that the people from Komori are polluted, he ascribes the significant characteristic of eta, “impurity,” to Komori people. Inferring that if the soldiers “had known” Koji was eta, they would have refused his offer, Senkichi presupposes that ‘eta-ness’ is knowable and that Koji and others “are” dirty eta, even if they try to hide their status. Senkichi unconsciously establishes them and their eta-ness as something that already exists, something to be discovered in themselves. His reasoning, which actually emphasizes Koji’s identity by associating him with impurity, naturally sounds as if Senkichi never provoked it; rather, he makes everyone see that eta is the representative, and the only, identity of Komori people, an identity which is inevitable and unchangeable. The fact that the soldiers, unless told, would never have found any critical difference between the eta and ordinary people is translated by Senkichi into the way that eta-ness can be “found,” not “invented.” He has power to define Koji, since his cultural assumption invites him to infer that Koji is born to be eta and to ensure that everyone “finds” eta-ness in him. Eta is the way Koji inevitably is. More implicit and more disguised is how Senkichi’s assumption constructs himself as a desiring subject—a subject that

defines itself in terms of its relationship to the other. By differentiating himself from the Komori people, Senkichi accords respect to the majority for being superior and considers this difference in status indigenous to society.

Thus, the supposedly more powerful non-Buraku-min are dependent upon this “othered” population for their own sense of self. Cultural, social, and historical assumptions, which are practiced through such social or ethnic demarcations, influence those associated with dominant cultural behavior. All Komori people, whether eta or not, operate within a system structured according to presence and lack of otherness. The soldiers find commonality with Komori people only if they lack the denigrating cultural assumptions of otherness, about the Komori. The soldiers identify a sense of sameness, a shared Japanese-ness, with Koji’s family since they do not belong to the same subculture which Senkichi does. In contrast, by asserting the “cultural truth” that the eta are polluted, Senkichi distinguishes himself from Koji. Assuming “otherness” and experiencing certain subcultures entitles one to produce a complete cultural knowledge. By concluding that his presumption, which is actually a *subcultural* product, is universal, Senkichi states that the soldiers could have rejected the potatoes because they shared the same assumption but were not aware of the need to act upon it. This cultural presumption emphasizes the difference between the Buraku-min and the dominant people and invites an explicit mode of social discrimination. Namely, people discriminate against others by stereotyping marginalized people in relation to dominant people.

In another episode, when Koji and Seitaro visit their friend Toyota, this subjective construction of identity that contributes to sub-classification within the Japanese peoples is clearly performed in the conversation between two non-Buraku people of the same family. In this case, one has no impure image of his Komori friends, and one has a “polluted others” image of them. During Koji and Seitaro’s visit, they are well treated by Toyota’s mother. They are

delighted because, as eta children, they have never been able to visit friends outside their community. Despite their joy at being welcomed, however, the conversation between Koji, Seitaro, and Toyota's mother reveals that the mother only accepts them because she believes that Koji and Seitaro are sons of the biggest landowners from a non-Buraku village. Toyota, knowing too well that his mother will not allow him to play with eta children, has lied to his mother:

My mother's stupid, isn't she?" said Toyota, walking on. "She's pleased if I say my friend's Senkichi Sayama from Sakata but she'd be angry if I said my friend's Seitaro Hatanaka from Komori."

Afraid that his mother's recognition that Seitaro and Koji are eta will only destroy their common identity, Toyota prevents her from acting upon her prejudices and destroying the friendships. His mother's prejudice is, like Senkichi's, based on her cultural assumption that Komori people are intangibly different and "others." This assumption grounded on "otherness" invites the unwarranted conclusion that the Buraku-min are detrimental to society. When the village of Komori suffers from a fire, Toyota's mother delivers a warning about the Komori children to Toyota:

I don't care how much you want to see the remains of the fire, Toyota, you must not go to Komori. They'd set upon you straight away if you did. They're not like the rest of us.

Drawing the line between the Komori and "us," Toyota's mother distinguishes between the Komori people and herself, creating a basic but groundless difference: while the Komori children could start a fire, ordinary children from a good family (i.e., non-Buraku children) could not. She explicitly reasons a



*priori* that Komori people “are not like the rest of us” in order to create a clear-cut division between her and the Buraku-min. She rejects any commonality between them as long as she presupposes that the eta are different and thus dreadful. Toyota’s mother accepts unquestioningly the differences between them and the Komori; while seeking relationships with the Buraku-min, Toyota through his lie also maintains the dominant culture’s stereotypes about the Buraku-min by (his) representing Koji and Seitaro as non-eta.

These scenes—in which Senkichi rationalizes the soldiers’ lack of knowledge and in which Toyota and his mother articulate contrary perspectives on Komori children—clarify the majority’s attitude to the Buraku-min and designate culturally-made assumptions as the foundation of their knowledge. Koji encounters the social discrimination in which the concept of commonality vanishes and that of difference remains and is emphasized. This discrimination which stereotypically focuses upon “otherness,” reflects not only Japan’s historical roots, but also the dominant people’s social and cultural experience. While history produced the lowest-ranked group, people’s “experiences” that already “referred to a particular kind of consciousness” or “awareness” of historical account propelled them to define the Buraku-min’s identity according to class affiliation.

### **Discourse on Identification and Alienation**

In the earlier chapters of the novel, Sumii emphasizes that Koji suffers from discrimination based on a culturally conditioned assumption. Particularly in the second half, the novel gradually addresses Koji’s growing understanding of the permanent political forces that are the roots of the dominant culture’s prejudices. It illuminates, to a considerable extent, the political formulation of the identity of both the Buraku-min and the dominant classes. In these chapters, Sumii demonstrates that this political rhetoric is especially promulgated in

the discourses of the classroom. Realizing that the Meiji Administration takes advantage of Japanese educational system in order to disseminate their new national policy and educate the people to perceive themselves as an ideal nation, she chooses the school that best reflects this political orientation and intention. Within educational discourses, she depicts the contradictory politics of identity: a Buraku student would sometimes be encouraged to think of him/herself as Japanese and at other times as the marginalized, outrageous “other”—the eta. Koji and Seitaro simultaneously suffer from and try to grasp what this contradictory process of identity formation might imply, why two different processes could be mutually possible not only within the discourse of education, but also within the larger context of society.

Several passages in the novel suggest that “cultural truth” rests on a foundation consisting of certain knowledge about the Buraku-min which all Japanese acquire through political rhetoric. This political rhetoric involves the interaction of the two concepts, similarity and difference or, in Kenneth Burke’s term, identification and alienation; both concepts—finding similarity and difference within the Buraku-min—maintain a politically idealized national identity. *The River with No Bridge* offers this Burkean perspective in the school teacher’s discourse and Koji’s interpretation of political doctrine.

In the novel, the indoctrination generated by two contradictory concepts begins in the classroom. In the first history lesson of the third term, a teacher asks the students to recite the first of the five articles of the Imperial Charter Oath which proposes abolishing the class hierarchy. This teacher, frustrated that only Seitaro can remember the oath, concludes that he repeats the Oath well because “he appears to be the only one to fully appreciate the benefits of the Meiji Restoration,” the benefits of dismantling the class system. The teacher explains:

Now, having abolished the classes of samurai, farmer, artisan, and

trader, His Imperial Majesty also graciously permitted the eta and the *hinin* to join the ranks of the commoners in August 1871. They are now known as ‘new commoners,’ since that is what they are, and there are said to be about 400,000 of them altogether in the country.

The teacher first emphasizes that abolishing the classes “permit[s]” the liberation of the eta, and next stresses that the unification itself is predetermined since “that is what they are.” This speech reveals a particular political perspective. Before the Charter was issued, the eta were alienated and had to keep their distance from commoners. With the Emperor’s “permission,” their distance suddenly disappears and even their identification as eta literally disappears. By proclaiming that “that is what they are”—that the eta are indistinguishable from others of a formally higher class—the teacher, the voice of the administration, expresses not only that the eta people *no longer* exist, but also that they had never existed except as a political fiction. He alters the history that concerns the existence of eta: not in the sense that the Charter “reform(s) the misguided administration of the Tokugawa shogunate” that divided society into four classes, but in the sense that it denies the administration’s evil practices of the past and assumes its justice is universal.

Understanding the Charter in this way illustrates that the new political structure strategically disregards the history of the eta. It edits the history of the class system in order to maintain silence about the class system, which naturally represses the other, not to mention the eta, or give it a voice, or to pronounce an end to discrimination. The teacher remarks that the new government officially accords new status for the eta, illustrating the ambiguous politics that determine the Japanese peerage system. The administration, while claiming to reform Japanese society by issuing the Emancipation Declaration, does so in fact only by changing its account of past, not by changing the

present condition itself.

Seitaro and Koji are confused about the nuances of meaning regarding restructuring the peerage system, because, while the Oath announces that there are now no eta and never have been eta, experience tells them that Japan is still divided into classes—the Imperial family, the nobility or the shizoku, and the commoners. In practice, not all Japanese enjoy equality; thus, Japan maintains multisubcultures under a universal monoculture which depends upon a rhetoric of silences. Toyota points to this contradiction, asking his teacher the following question:

Toyota: “But they’re all Japanese, aren’t they?” Teacher: “That is perfectly obvious. And that is why it states in the Charter Oath that ‘all classes, both high and low, shall unite in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state.’ Which means that the Imperial family, the nobility, and the common people shall all join together in thinking about and carrying out the government of Japan.”

Equality among the commoners, according to the teacher’s understanding, is obviously intended for the sake of building up the nation’s military power and promoting Japan’s modernization. For the Imperial family and the nobility, comprised of the relatives of the Emperor or those closely connected with the Emperor, politics does not require unifying the population. However, it is easier to carry out governmental administration if the commoners, whose population is the largest and the most diverse, “join together in thinking about the government of Japan.” The Meiji Administration can take advantage of “sameness” to order a society torn by class hierarchy. This partial erasure of class distinctions among commoners rhetorically functions to make the whole nation believe that all Japanese are one family and need to unite. However, as Toyota points out, even though those people still divided into classes are “all

Japanese,” this rhetorical conceptualization of Japanese identity is inconsistent with political practice. Toyota senses the contradiction between theory and practice, even if he cannot yet account for it.

While Toyota recognizes the political disorientation, Seitaro, in another episode, articulates the inconsistent politics of the new terminology for the eta, “new commoners.” On the same day as the history lesson, it is the Komori children’s turn to clean the lavatories. They are talking about the five articles of the Charter Oath; one of them asks Seitaro how he has managed to remember everything. When Seitaro responds that learning them is a waste of time, he does not realize that the teacher is nearby. Easily detecting the unfaithful attitude in the Komori students because he expects it, the angered teacher asks Seitaro to tell him why he insists that learning the Oath is not worthwhile. Knowing only too well that the teacher will never understand, Seitaro first hesitates, but at last he says:

We’re new commoners, sir. Nothing’s going to change that, even if we do know all five articles of the Oath by heart.

Enduring the endless insults of the other children, Seitaro perceives that, even though the Charter affirms that all commoners are equal, the term “new commoners” is part of a cynical attempt of the Japanese state to invigorate the economy by urging the incorporation of a previously ostracized people into the workplace. The official name “new commoners” exposes this hidden agenda of Japanese politics. That they (eta) are “new commoners” indicates an irony found in what the teacher has said before—that even though they now ostensibly belong with everyone else, “commoners” in fact “is what they are.” Even though the new title of “commoners” seems to be inclusive, its new-ness never repairs the existing status of “commoner,” and thus the term is exclusive. Instead, the term that seems to embrace the eta instead continues to exclude

them.

Simply put, as long as the people's perception remains the same, reality never changes. So long as the Komori children have to do the cleaning separate from the others, "nothing is going to change," even though their status is differently named and equalized. One of the Komori children best clarifies the perplexity of this political construction of Japanese identity: "He [the teacher] wanted to hit Sei[taro] anyway because we're new commoners and *eta*" (174). The new status merely reproduces the old concept. The Komori people's being "one of them" is something that the dominant people cannot accept: the inclusion of "eta-ness" in "commoners" is the invasion of their superior status. "We're new commoners and *eta*" suggests that the dominant people, despite their understanding of the governmental order, only admit that the Komori are both new commoners "and" *eta*. However, the two statuses are never merged on the surface of speech, and thus the repression gains even more power from the rhetoric of silence.

The government's term new reflects the existing social conditions in which *eta* is a class; to use Burke's mode of rhetorical analysis, the political intent ends in a product which is capable of being constructed as involving a strategy to affect situation in addition to or in place of a report about referential objects and events. To put it another way, politics carefully reworks language in order to pursue its hidden agenda. It can inscribe its concept of equalization by changing the language: It can substitute new commoners for *eta*. Its product is the Edict of Emancipation which is constructed in written language, and thus is able to be repeatedly reviewed by everyone. The Edict of Emancipation—a product to unify the nation—abolishes the title *eta*. It grants the outcasts full legal equality in place of abolishing the ultimate hierarchy consisting of the Emperor, nobility and commoners classes. In addition, however, it tacitly perpetuates the polluted essence of *eta*-ness from Japanese identity by ignoring the impure past of Japanese history. Knowing that nation can be modernized

only if the people are treated equally and have a high level of education, the Meiji administration aims at assuring a monoethnic characterization of Japan and maintains silence about the conceptual difference of the Buraku-min.

The political ideology behind the Emancipation is the unifier of the disparate. The administration fears the desperation and desires of the unified Japanese nation; in its anxiety, the administration inevitably imposes on its nation a monoethnic image. *The River with No Bridge* incorporates references to two political crises : the 1909 assassination of Marquis Hirobumi Ito by a Korean, and the failure of Japanese anarchists in 1910 to assassinate the Emperor Meiji—both described by the Headmaster in order to show the government's fears and desires.

*The River with No Bridge*, through the explanation of two historical events in the school teacher's address, articulates political rhetoric competing to construct hegemonic culture while preserving the hierarchical system. The following school discourses present Koji's discovery of discriminatory force against the Buraku-min, a force instituted and extended by the Meiji Administration. During morning assembly, the Headmaster, known as Old Down Pour, tells his pupils that the announcement he is about to make concerns a most terrible issue in the world. He begins with a reference to an assassination of an important political figure, a founder of the new administration that took place a year before:

I feel sure you all remember how Marquis Hirobumi Ito was killed on October 26 last year, when he was shot by a Korean scoundrel at Harbin station. . . Well, the wicked An Jung-geun was executed this year on March 26, exactly five months after the event; a fitting end for Marquis Ito's evil assassin. . . However, something a hundred times, a thousand times worse than the assassination of Marquis Ito has now happened, and here in our own country. . . Boys and girls,

what has happened is as dreadful as if we had lost the sun. We could not live even one day without the sun. The whole world would be in darkness and we could not possibly survive. Nevertheless, some wretches far more wicked than An Jung-geun have actually sought to plunge this nation of ours into darkness. Of course, they have been caught—seven of them altogether. They had made a bomb and intended to plunge us all into darkness by throwing it at His Imperial Majesty, our most revered Sovereign, whom we look up to as to the sun.

By bringing Marquis Ito's case to the pupils' minds, the Headmaster reemphasizes that Shusui Kotoku's plotting to assassinate the Emperor is more significant than actually killing a political figure, Ito. It is more significant because it concerns a crime against the Emperor, not against ordinary people. He thus clearly establishes the structure in which the Emperor is more than a human being; he is *kami*, superior to everything else. Building this hierarchy, the Headmaster tries to generate a picture of a disordered and gloomy world without the Emperor. But his emphasis on both the Emperor as *kami* and the significance of the expected outrage by the Japanese makes Koji wonder about the logic of the Headmaster's speech. He discovers contradictions in the speech : if the Emperor were a *kami*, even a bomb could not kill him. Like the Edict of Emancipation, which supposedly attempts to assimilate the nations but in fact maintains the class hierarchy, the Headmaster's speech asks one to elevate the Emperor from the ordinary people at the same time that it inevitably invites one to identify the same humanity with him. Placing the Emperor's identity in relation to the ordinary people in these two ways, the political urgency to endure two antithetical concepts gradually becomes clearer when the Headmaster explains Kotoku's reasons for attempting to assassinate this *kami* Emperor:



It seems they have been discontented with the state of society for a long time and aimed to overturn the present order of things at the first opportunity. They decided that the quickest way of achieving their objective was to eliminate the Emperor, who is like the sun to us, the very heart of our nation . . . They also declared that war is wrong, daring to voice opposition to the Sino- Japanese and Russo- Japanese Wars. What a flagrant act of disloyalty—to oppose the Imperial edict ordering us to take up arms against Russia.

Because Japanese were engaged in this assault, it is a hundred times, a thousand times worse than, far more wicked than, Korean scoundrels. The Headmaster's speech indirectly suggests that a flagrant act such as a Korean's assassination of a Japanese could be explained in terms of foreignness; when there is no foreignness involved, Kotoku's case is unacceptable. Differentiating anarchists as far more wicked than a foreign national, the government can only eliminate those who do not share Japanese-ness.

The headmaster's speech reveals the political need to unify the Japanese people in order to restructure Japan's economy and to maintain the Imperial system. Effectively using the case of Marquis Hirobumi Ito's assassination by a Korean, he heavily values the plot of Shusui Kotoku, not only because it concerns the Emperor, but also because it concerns the fact that the deed should have been done by Japanese nationals. Political fears perpetuate in this distinctive treatment of anarchists, for anarchists disclose society's predicament, a predicament caused by political disorientation of equalization. The Headmaster continues:

Boys and girls, these scoundrels not only opposed the war, they had other ideas even more dreadful; ideas that would be ruin of our

society. They sought to deprive people of their wealth, to take away their money. They thought that since all men are equal, money too should be distributed equally among us. But then, of course, nobody would bother to work at all. It would lead to chaos, every man for himself. This terrible group are known as anarchists and their ringleader is Shusui Kotoku, whose given name is Denjiro.

The execution of an anarchist Shusui Kotoku thus becomes the symbol of purification for a unified and harmonized nation and for Japanese unification. The government eliminates any concepts which disturb the fulfillment of the national corporation. Thus, the Headmaster's fear about the destruction of Japanese unity only masks the administration's desires to promote capitalism, to lessen the cultural and economic gap between the West and Japan, exacerbated by Japan's past 200-year isolation from the outside world. For Japan, it is inevitable that the culture will try simultaneously to keep the image of unification while promoting Westernization, whose symbol is capitalism. Although the government is reluctant to practice its policy of Emancipation because it fears the total deconstruction of the Imperial system, it needs to erase rhetorically this hierarchy by declaring that all Japanese are unified under a common identity, are made equal. Japanese politics does this every chance it gets in order to harness unified power to carry out its administrative policies.

*The River with No Bridge* dramatizes Koji's skepticism about political rhetoric; he shares with the assassin Shusui Kotoku an insight into the contradictory foundation of the hierarchical system and of the abolition of class distinction. Koji understands that the purpose of the anarchists' attempted assassination of the Emperor constitutes an effort to reconstruct society, an effort to articulate the political disorientation that seeks to maintain both the Imperial and equal society. He thus detects this gap between political theory and practice that hegemonic rhetoric attempts to perpetuate. Shusui Kotoku

is the first Japanese to disclose the underlying inconsistency of Japan's monoethnic ideology. The Headmaster's speech mirrors political attempts to conceal such inconsistencies. The Headmaster is seen as defending an inadequate policy when he claims that the total elimination of the Imperial system would lead society to total collapse. In other words, by presenting Koji's sensitivity of the detrimental aspects of full-scale equalization, Sumii reveals the discrepancies between official Japanese rhetoric and Japanese social practice.

Therefore politics can define Japanese identity as attaining unity by rhetorically eliminating anything that disturbs a uniquely homogenized characterization of the nation. Not only Shusui Kotoku, but the novel itself projects Koji's perspective on yet another historical event to be taken into consideration when investigating how political rhetoric attempts to hide the inequalities of Japanese society. In this episode, General Nogi and his wife are discussed in school because they sacrificed their lives after Emperor Meiji passed away. The Headmaster, deep sorrowful, explains to the pupils that Nogi's death demonstrates his loyalty as a Japanese national:

No common suicide this : it was the supreme act of junshi. General Nogi and his wife committed ritual suicide in order to follow Emperor Meiji in death as they had in life. As commander of the Third Army, General Nogi captured Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War. Port Arthur was a stronghold reputed to be impregnable, and heavy losses were sustained on both sides, including the general's two sons. After this campaign, General Nogi resolved to die by his own hand to atone for the loss of so many of his men .... What a shining example he set for us of the way the Japanese Warrior Code should be followed.

The Headmaster, as his nickname Old Down Pour suggests, is weeping, unable to bear the tragic news of General Nogi; the pupils, however, find it hilarious to see him in such a tearful state and cannot help giggling. Their lack of manners makes him extremely angry, for he has no doubt that Koji and other eta pupils to slap them, thundering out, Filthy little *eta* like you. . . Koji, humiliated by the Headmaster, says to himself,

What was so special about General Nogi? Or the taking of Port Arthur? Didn't he know it was thanks to all those soldiers who died that they won the war? And his [Koji's] father had died, too! Damm it! What was so special about the Emperor? Or dying by *junshi*? Everybody died in the end, didn't they?

Koji's questions all interrogate politics' doublespeak. The public sees General Nogi's death as special, for it is related to the Emperor, the highest being under the sun. Koji, however, while fully aware of the Emperor's special social status, believes that the lowest people, including his father, contributed to winning the war at the expense of their own lives. The ritual death of the general should not be privileged above the others' death. Nogi's act is regarded as a politically imposed restriction that maintains a political definition of the national identity and hides its inconsistent policy and practice by the Meiji Administration. Koji's thoughts reveal this inconsistent practice of General Nogi that, in effect, insists on defining the Japanese as one family while silencing and disregarding the actual social practices of inequality.

Koji connects the valorization of Nogi's death with the political construction of a monoethnic nation. Responsible for the death of many of his soldiers, Nogi committed suicide. However, as all the nations fought under the Emperor, not Nogi, logically the guilt of the war could be imposed upon the Emperor. Koji realizes that one implication of the Headmaster's remarks is

that because the Emperor is *kami*, the highest of all, no guilt can be imputed to any act he commits. Therefore, those who are representatives of the Emperor take his guilt upon themselves. Koji's question, What was so special about the Emperor? suggests that Nogi's suicide is an acknowledgment of and atonement for the Emperor's guilt. In order to maintain the present hierarchy of the Imperial system, Nogi's death is inevitable. Nogi's ritual suicide reveals the central contradiction : on the one hand, all Japanese are equal, on the other hand, the Emperor is guiltless, untouchable, supreme. *The River with No Bridge* thus shows that the politics cannot help disguising the inconsistency of an attempt to both maintain the hierarchy and liberate the class system.

### **Invisible Signifier**

*The River with No Bridge* enacts a crisis in which ideologies compete—ideologies which assert any orthodox characterization of marginal people as well as ordinary people and which therefore reveal inconsistency in political rhetoric's construction of the hegemonic image of the Japanese people. In disclosing the dominant people's cultural assumptions, *The River with No Bridge* initially perpetuates the repressive definition of the Buraku-min that the majority historically and culturally constructs. Gradually, however, Sumii articulates how hegemonic discourse erases subcultural differences in order to deny the existence of a repressive culture. The novel does not perpetuate but rather analyzes the identity of the Buraku-min that is omitted or overlooked in hegemonic accounts. *The River with No Bridge* recognizes not only that difference exists, but also that it is relationally constituted. It insists that identity ought to be constituted in diverse terms—gender, race, class—so that reducing identity to ethnic considerations, or to alleged monotonicity, alone improperly distorts the resulting definition of Japanese-ness. Koji, through his skeptical appraisal of the discourses of the Headmaster and his

teacher, sees the political consequences of Japan's drive towards an ideal, monoethnic culture. Drawing attention to a dimension of political language usually dismissed by conventional reading, *The River with No Bridge* shows that cultural practices and ideologies have their origin not only in individual experiences and practices but also in governmental edicts and policies. The novel reveals that the very power or dominance of the government makes alternative cultural behaviors and institutions unavailable. In this sense, Sumii's sensitive examination of political history in the Meiji restoration era maps the intricate interrelationships between the government's desire to preserve Imperial culture on the one hand and its efforts to promote a monoethnic ideology on the other. Ironically, both these contradictory aims perpetuate the marginalization of the eta. Because the two inconsistent policies operate within the structure of Imperial culture, the politics inevitably scapegoat those Buraku-min by including them theoretically and excluding them practically. Theoretical inclusion denies the existence of the Buraku-min; practical exclusion merely maintains the quality of their identity in eta-ness.

*The River with No Bridge* strikingly ends not in the reification of political ideals, but in a critique of them, problematizing the desire behind such ideals. Elucidating the reasoning of the anarchists' and Nogi's self-inflicted guilt in episodes of Koji's school discourse, *The River with No Bridge* breaks the silence about the government's failure to follow through on what is ultimately an ideological commitment to equality. The alternative values, shown in Shusui Kotoku's idea and in practices of politics' partial liberation of the class system, gives the lie to the hegemonic construction of Japanese society, whether this construction vaunts the economic development of the nation or the coherence and unity of the people. *The River with No Bridge's* analysis reveals the contradictions between the government's ideological construction of the icon of a monoethnic Japan and its practical commitment to the hierarchical imperial state. strikingly ends not in the reification of political ideals, but in

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## Notes

- 1 Politics of Identities : Narratives of Invisible Signifier in Japan (1) in *Sapporo University Sogoronso* vol.51, March 2021, 9-20
- 2 Sue Sumii, *The River with No Bridge*, trans. Susan Wilkinson, (Tokyo : Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1989) .
- 3 Komori is very close to Kyoto. In *The River with No Bridge*, this region has several Buraku (communities of the lowest class). Koji's relatives live in one of those villages.
- 4 In olden times, persons subject to discrimination were forced to live in designated areas on the Japanese archipelago, engaging in occupations related to death or bloodletting, such as disposal of dead cattle and horses; in leatherworking crafts, such as the manufacture of armory and tack; and in the disposal of corpses following executions.  
These jobs were shunned by other people because of the taboos of the Buddhist religion related to death and bloodletting as defilement. Masayuki Takagi, "A Living Legacy of Discrimination," *Japan Quarterly* (July-September 1991) : 285.
- 5 There was another outcast group known as the hinin (literally, nonperson) . Unlike the eta, however, they were not considered hereditarily impure and included commoners who had fallen into disgrace and might occasionally be able to regain their former

- status. Susan Wilkinson, *The River with No Bridge*. 358.
- 6 Takagi, 285.
- 7 Sumii, 31.
- 8 Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1983). Robert Lapsley, *Film Theory : An Introduction* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1988)
- 9 Sumii, 69.
- 10 Sumii, 119.
- 11 Joan W. Scott argues that experience is to be often taken for granted. She puts it this way : “It [experience] operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals.” “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991) : 782.
- 12 Kenneth Burke discussed the concept of identification and alienation in detail in his works such as *Language as Symbolic Action* and *A Rhetoric of Motives*.
- 13 The part that Seitaro recited is as follows : “Assemblies shall be widely established and all measures of government decided by public discussion. All classes, both high and low, shall unite in vigorously carrying out the administration of affairs of state. Civil and military officials, as well as the common people, shall be allowed to realize their aspirations so that there may be no discontent. Evil customs of the past shall be abandoned and everything based on universal principles of justice. Knowledge shall be sought throughout the world, thereby strengthening the foundations of Imperial rule.” Sumii, 171-172.
- 14 Sumii, 172.
- 15 Sumii, 173.
- 16 Students clean the school after the classes. Cleaning is regarded as one of the important disciplines.
- 17 Sumii, 174.
- 18 Joseph R. Gusfield, “Introduction,” *On Symbols and Society*, ed. intro. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989) 18.
- 19 Joseph R. Gusfield, 18.
- 20 Sumii, 168.
- 21 Sumii, 188.
- 22 Sumii, 188-189.



- 23 Sumii, 283.  
24 Sumii, 284.  
25 Sumii, 286.

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\* 本研究は 2021 年度札幌大学研究助成による研究成果の一部である。