(auto)biography writing for my silent mothers*

Kyoko Mori

I was born in Kobe, Japan, in 1957, grew up speaking Japanese, hearing and later also speaking English. About a year after my mother's death in 1969, my father remarried. I spent the next seven years failing to get along with my stepmother, missing my mother with a keen sense of loss that seemed to grow rather than diminish from year to year. I wrote about these feelings in my journal in English, mostly because my father and stepmother could not read English. I also associated English with a more direct mode of expression: saying exactly what you mean rather than leaving much to polite ambiguities in the way Japanese did. The literature in English that we studied in high school impressed me with the writers' strong sense of voice: Thoreau's Walden, for instance, and Shakespeare's sonnets. While their writing did not directly address my own experience, I admired the eloquence of their language. In 1977, I went to college in Japan to study English literature. Two years later, I was able to transfer to Rockford College in Illinois with a full scholarship. Thus, I left Japan at twenty, finally free from my father and stepmother, determined never to return to the personal oppression they represented, or to the public oppression of assertive women that I associated with the whole Japanese culture.

In Rockford I started writing fiction. The first short stories I wrote, however, had little to do with my mother, myself, or our experience of being Japanese women. Although I continued to think of my mother and to mourn her, that material stayed only in my journal. After getting my B.A., I went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to enroll in the M.A. program in creative writing. Both my teachers and my friends liked the stories I was writing about women of unspecified ethnicity coming to one realization or another about their past in some unspecified city in the Mid-West, but I was frustrated with my writing; I could not find my voice or my subject matter.

The breakthrough came in 1980, when I wrote a short poem about my mother's mother bringing peonies to our family cemetery. Then I wrote a series of poems based on my mother's journal entries from the last two years of her life. I was finally translating her voice, her experience, into a new language, into poems that were a duet of our two voices. Since then, I have written and published both short fiction and poems based on and inspired by the lives of my mother and her mothers. The most important aspect of my writing has now become my mission as their biographer. Because their presence is vital to my daily living and my writing is firmly rooted in that daily living, the autobiographical elements of my work always include them; there is little distinction between autobiography and biography. My work is a continuous talk-story, harmonizing my life and their lives.

To My Ancestral Spirits *

To my mind, they were mostly women who
lived the last thirty years of their lives
inside grey or brown kimono, quilting
the colors they'd given up--red and pink
of their childhood, green and blue of their
youth-
into bridal futon beddings for their

[*This paper is based on my part in a three-woman presentation, "Re-sounding connections: Mother-Daughter Writing in Multi-Cultural Transcriptions," given at the Bicentennial Women, Race and Ethnicity Conference at Georgetown University, April 6, 1989. Special credit and thanks are due to my co-panelists, Andrea Musher and Wendy Ho.]

grand-daughters. Often they outlived their
men many years, living on rice and a
handful of beans, toward the end growing
nothing but a patch of white chrysanthe-
mums
for the altar.
At forty, my mother had
a light brown coat made, putting away
the peacock-blue one she'd become too
old for. She had the tailor line her
new coat with flannel, red and green
tartan no one could see. After her death
in the spring, my aunt folded the coat
for storage. "Your mother still liked such
bright colors," she said, brushing the flannel
with her fingers. I stored away that remark
among what I wanted to remember
most about her.
I left my father's house
at twenty, taking only a few of her
possessions: diaries, photographs, a box of
jewelry, a sweater. My father's wife,
I knew, would burn the rest. Out of the
flames
my mother and her mothers rose up, crossed
the ocean with me. They ask me now for
the colors they'd given up. Through me they
hunger for the yellow of johnny-jump-ups
in my garden, the blue-purple of morning
glories. On my windowsill, pink geraniums
flowered sporadically all winter, random
messages from them. Were I at my
grandmother's
altar, I'd offer them a dark red chrysanthe-
mum,
large as a heart, a perfect globe.
Chosen by them to live in another
land, I offer them my words. Their voices
name each petal, each leaf vein through me.

*The South Florida Poetry Review, 4:2:5 (Winter 1987)

Of all my poems, "To My Ancestral Spirits" comes closest to being a statement of my purpose as a poet. I want to speak out for my mothers whose sorrows were silenced by the Japanese aesthetic code. According to this code, it was unseemly for a woman to speak up against oppression or to wear colors that were too bright for her age. A woman was taught to be beautiful through silent suffering and self-effacement. Because this oppression through aesthetics is closely tied to the way the Japanese language is spoken or written by men and women, I have needed a new language, English, in which to speak for my mothers, to give them back their colors.

Of course, I have come to understand that English, in and of itself, is not necessarily a liberating language. I have seen the frustrations other ethnic-American poets feel about the Anglo-dominated tradition of English literature, especially in the way we are often taught literature through such "greats" as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Eliot, Stevens. A young non-Anglo poet coming out of an English survey course feels baffled, not having read any literary "forefather" he or she can identify with.

In this regard, however, I was fortunate to be a woman. Because of my gender as well as, or perhaps more than, my cultural heritage, I never expected to feel directly related to these literary fathers, even though I admired some of their work. Their tradition was very clearly not mine. The survey courses in Japanese literature were no different. Except for a couple of 12th century women (Lady Murasaki being one of them), we never read any women writers in these courses, either. It wasn't until I read Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath on my own that I found writers I could consider my literary forebears.

In the meantime, I had learned to turn to my actual mother and her mothers as a source of my writing as well as my life, so I wasn't as frustrated at not being able to identify with Pope or Eliot or Mishima as I might have been. Through my mother, both Western and Eastern cultures came to me to form my heritage. The following poem is about claiming the traditions of art and culture through her memory.

A Day in the Country (The Art Institute Museum, December 1984) *

"This summer, painting landscapes at Asnieres, I saw more color than before."
--Vincent Van Gogh, 1860, letter to his sister.

In his "Corner in Voyer
d'Argenson Park at Asnieres," Van Gogh saw
that the figure among the trees was made of
the same light

as the leaves, the earth,
the petals, the sky. Light like
jumping fish dotted his vision with golden
scales. Monet,

in "Gladioli," made Camille's
parasol bloom in the upper-left
corner, green with the light of the flowers and

the sun, green

with eternity. To see
the world burn with such color was
enough for my mother who never knew to
paint. She tended

pink roses, each bud a perfect
sculpture. Her left hand sketched the
monarch butterflies poised over their slow
unfolding.
The yellow

vine roses she coaxed to twine
around the garden gate bloomed the
spring after her death, so much light under
my bedroom
windows. She

returns to me in these brush-
strokes of light. I walk slowly from picture
to picture, stepping back from each to find
color,
more color

* The Northwest Review, 26:1 (1986), 20-21.

Embroidery, weaving, and other works of fingers are central images of my recent poems. These are the essential expressions of women's culture; in such works, our mothers' longing to create beauty is somehow reconciled with the need they often felt to be "useful" and "practical." My mother drew her patterns from her own imagination rather than from pattern books--animals, flowers, people in bright feathered costumes--and filled them with stitches in the beautiful colors she could no longer wear. She worked alone, in silence, or sometimes in the company of other women. Recently, I saw an exhibition of 17th to 19th centuryEnglish and American tapestry work, most of which was done by women. I was struck by what I thought of as the silent language of stitches, each smaller-than-a-grain-of-sand stitch full of determination and longing to create beauty. Such works of fingers, I realized then, connect me to my own mother and to the larger traditions of women's culture, to their silent but colorful language.

Five Meditations on the Works of Fingers

i: Scenes from Abraham's life, England, circa 1670, needlework tapestry

Birds, snakes, caterpillars,
dogs, and butterflies
crowd the periphery of
the story, their silken
heads the same slick oblongs,

indistinguishable as though
they were turning into one
another. The desert of
Abraham is thick with
silk-petalled tulips, their

mouths open like a lion's, man-
shaped trees with beaded
fruit. This is no Great
Chain, but a jungle of
imagination, happy chaos.

ii: Jacob's Ladder, England, circa 1730, wool on linen

In the Age of Reason, how solid
the ladder looks with tent stitches, not

a bit like an ethereal dream. Each
angel, dressed in a striped desert robe

the same as the sleeping Jacob's,
spreads out his wings like a new
invention,

a practical balancing device
for working on a ladder. Above them

all, the sky deepens a mysterious
blue and the land below fills with stitches,

blade by blade, petal by petal.

iii: Urn of Flowers, Providence, Rhode Island, 1797, silk and silk chenille

In the urn placed on a grassy
hill, roses bloom larger than
the row of groomed elms and sheep

clouds in the background. Blue
forget-me-nots, yellow
daffodils, white straw flowers,

each detail as accurate as
a recalled dream, the colors as
vivid, while the perspective

loses itself in the joy of
handiwork and long hours.

iv: Kobe, Japan, 1965

What I remember most are
the embroidery threads
on the table, curls after
curls of them like stamens
from exotic flowers, and those

thin silver needles with large
tear-drop eyes, more forgiving,
easier to thread than sewing
needles. In my memory, it is
always raining outside as my

mother and the women from her
embroidery group sit in
a circle stitching piano covers,
cushions, our blouses, satchels for
our dancing shoes and music books.

Their fingers and voices constant
as rain, they intertwined quarter
notes with arabesques of pink
petals, made unbroken chains of
red cross stitches like kisses

to slip over our heads on gloomy
mornings, filled the walls of our
identical apartments with animals
of their imagination--spotted
giraffes, green iguanas, smiling tigers.

v: Mitsuko Uchida, pianist, radio interview, 1988

London, she says, is a no man's land
where she can float about happily, free
from

the family obligations of her
childhood Tokyo or the claims of Western

music in the Vienna of her teens
where every brick or pillar vibrated

hard with the past not her own. How does
she spend her days in London? Playing

Mozart and Beethoven, riding her
bicycle, washing her t-shirts by hand.

In another no man's land where I
float to sing, I imagine her, this

sister of no country, pulling her t-shirts
out of the water and spreading them on

the line where the colors fill with the wind
and dance the free-floating wing dance as
music

rises out of her window like breath.

Our connection to our mothers and to the traditions they represent is a complex matter. On one hand, we are empowered by our mothers' strength, by the often-silent language they left us in their struggles. On the other hand, we feel betrayed by their defeat and silence; we resent them for being part of the oppressive traditions in any way, for handing down those traditions to us.*

[*I am indebted to Andrea Musher and her theories of "matrodynamics" for the discussion of these two predominant patterns.]

Because I was twelve at the time of her death, I hadn't experienced the adolescent anger, fear, and frustrations women often experience about their mothers. Like many women who grow up in cultures in which our mothers are clearly victims, I was spared the burden of seeing my mother as the oppressor. I tend to see the women's culture my mother was part of as quite different from, even antithetical to, the mainstream/malestream Japanese culture which oppressed us. For better or worse, I tend to associate oppression not with my mothers but with men, as individual fathers and grandfathers, or in such large groups as the government, the religious institutions, the society.

On the personal level, then, my connection with my mother and her mothers empowers me. By writing about them, I feel that her life and their lives are continuing through mine. However, on the symbolic level, it disturbs me to see such a clear separation between the (sub)culture my mothers represent and the dominant culture of Japan. I wish I could see the dominant culture of Japan as a nurturing source, as a mother-culture, rather than as the very force that drove my own mother to despair and death. I sometimes regret my inability to claim my "mother tongue" as the source and vehicle of my expression.

The way out of that conflict is difficult and paradoxical. Perhaps it is no more than a compromise. I do, however, believe that in writing

(auto)biography

claim. Now she blows fireballs from her mouth,

unleashing every bit of power from
within, emptying herself. Carrying
the burden of exorcised evil in

white festooned paper, she climbs up toward
the mountain top. I imagine following her,
barefoot on the mountain
path to the place

of cleansing where she ties the paper to
a tree whose top branches touch the sky--
the contact tenuous as the thread of

our lives. There, she dances to the spirits.

*Sing Heavenly Muse!, November 15 ("daily rhythms: three women poets"), 20-21.

MESSAGES FOR MY MOTHER

Kyoko Mori *Fall, 1988*

The sky this fall is a chalkboard full of
messages: fish-scale clouds scribbled across
the afternoon, purple mountains that rise into

thin air, and at sunset, fragments of
musical scores rolling toward the horizon.
Anticipating another winter, the season

of your sorrow, I search the scenery for
signs. The trees are shedding their leaves
like tokens: what remains is a row after

row of brittle hieroglyphics stretched
along the highway. Driving home from work, I
remember the walks I took that first

autumn without you. I sat on a hill of
goldenrods to watch the sunset, to
imagine you wading among the cloud

sandbars that floated up in pale blue. Last
month, on my brother's face, I saw you
again. I watched his plane till it was

a silver charm entering the clouds. Someone
else's daughter was crying; the father said
over and over, "Don't you remember she

always comes back?" I've acquired a fear
of flying. Sitting tight among strangers,
I imagine never seeing any other faces,

the story of what happened to us pulled
piece by piece out of a black voice box
recovered from fire or water, the story of

You stopped inside me. This December, though,
flying to New Orleans, I shall look down
on the clouds and think of you. Up there, they

turn solid, a land mass without sharp
edges. How can I fear falling into them,
into the revelation of what you know? And

touching down on the long straight line of
the run-way, I'll begin again to travel
toward you, to see you everywhere, in

the waiting faces of strangers, in every
postcard my brother sends me from other
airports where he is taking your dimples,

eye-lashes, moon-slivers in his fingers.