I. Introduction

The main character of 'Sinking Ground' is a 36-year old office worker named Noriko. As symbolized by Sumida River in Tokyo separating the neighborhood of her childhood from that of her life in the 1980’s when the story takes place, Noriko is also a woman divided. The distinctness of her poverty- and trauma-ridden past in the post-war era, despite its horrors, nonetheless provides Noriko with a sense of identity which cannot adjust to the bright, clean, relatively safe but isolated, consumeristic environment of Tokyo during the Bubble Era. Noriko has some ability to see flaws in the systems of both eras, as well as tenaciousness which was surely a factor in allowing her to escape her previous surroundings. However, because she is a woman, and one with no familial support system and only a high school education at that, she is doomed to fail to progress any further in her career. The frustration resulting from fighting against an unfair system, coupled with untreated Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), bring about a crisis which leaves both Noriko and the reader lost by the end of the story. Not only is one woman’s struggle within a distinct social milieu depicted, but also the short story genre’s transition from what Oe called ‘pure’ literature to the decadent confusion of Bubble Era literature he derided (Oe, 1989).

II. Noriko’s Past: Trauma in Post-War Tokyo

Noriko grew up in a filthy neighborhood consisting of a malodorous slaughterhouse, paper mill, and an ammonia factory (Masuda, 1991, 50-51). Unbelievably, children ‘amused’ themselves (and occasionally died) by playing in a river marked with a skull-decorated “No Swimming” sign,
hiding in coal bins, or putting their ears to railroad tracks to listen for approaching trains (Masuda, 1991, 51). In the Japanese-language version of the story, Noriko clearly lives next to an outcast, or buraku, neighborhood, and barefoot, dirty buraku children are seen collecting metal instead of going to school (Masuda, 1985, 23-25). Noriko gives a hint to her personality when she breaks all social rules by smiling at them; however, she also joins in their harassment by shouting “Cow Killer!” when they herd animals towards the slaughterhouse (Masuda, 1985, 20), the bloody sight of which is described in gruesome detail in the Japanese original (Masuda, 1985, 20, 23-25).2

Noriko’s identity is in part formed by the existence of the buraku (and other children) in her neighborhood: she does not feel poor since they are obviously so much poorer (Masuda, 1991, 27). After a buraku murder over a trivial event (foreshadowing Noriko’s later frustration and dangerous persistence in regards to trivial but symbolic events), the neighborhood is cleaned out by the city and Noriko has no idea where the buraku have been taken. The young Noriko imagines that perhaps they have been led to the slaughterhouse, the frightening downward slant of such a thought indicating the PTSD which will haunt her throughout her life (Masuda, 1985, 23-25).

Noriko’s father is described as being different from other men in the neighborhood: he is never abusive, always well-kept, and spends his free time reading mystery novels; overall, a positive being with hopes of helping his daughter attain a university education (Masuda, 1991, 54). In the Japanese original, the reader also learns that he never came home complaining despite the dangerous games he had to play on the job (Masuda, 1985, 31). The family is in fact so poor that he risks his life by climbing into a paper shredding machine to pick up a few coins left there, where he meets a grisly death (Masuda, 1991, 52-53). Not only is this event in and of itself a horrific trauma, but thereafter Noriko is harassed by her neighbors who claim that her father ruined a good money-making deal for all of them by getting himself killed, and that her mother is now selfishly scavenging coins elsewhere before the others can have a chance (Masuda, 1991, 28). The shock of the accident, the desperate and stubborn response of her mother, and the harassment of her neighbors are further sparks for the PTSD which will continually affect Noriko’s ability to get along with others.

Noriko’s mother is not described before the accident, but after it becomes the stoic family breadwinner, always dour but dutiful (Masuda, 1991, 53-54). She has more traditional dreams for her daughter, commenting on how she will fulfill her duty by providing at least a basic education (by which perhaps she means compulsory junior high school), but is hopeful that Noriko will marry someday (Masuda, 1991, 54). Noriko’s mother dies of cervical cancer at, significantly, the
same age as Noriko is in this story. Noriko imagines her mother’s womb as an “unclaimed lost object” without a husband (Masuda, 1991, 55), giving the reader a hint that the adult Noriko wanted to follow the traditional path of marriage and family and is frustrated at being unable to do so. Noriko then imagines a thread in the cloudy sky “unconnected to the rest of the world”, in what may be an umbilical cord reference to Noriko’s loss of identity at being both motherless and childless (Masuda, 1991, 55).

While walking home from the store at age 9, Noriko was tricked by a man into kissing: she describes “darkness” spreading over her and an inability to see at the onset of the “nasty, slimy experience” after which “her heart went on pounding for a long time” (Masuda, 1991, 49-50). While she is consciously aware of how this molestation made her distrust all men (Masuda, 1991, 50), Noriko does not seem to be able to see how it, as well as her father’s accident and the neighborhood reaction, have caused PTSD and put her into a perpetual state of panic symbolized by her fall into darkness and her loud heartbeat whenever anything slightly out of the ordinary occurs (Masuda, 1991, 39, 43, 50, 60, 63, and 67; Panzarino, 2007, 5).

Noriko’s return to these memories of her difficult past was inspired by a contemporary newspaper article about cows which escaped from the slaughterhouse in her old neighborhood (Masuda, 1991, 48). The imagery of this event, in which police are at a loss as to how to herd the cows back towards their fate and have to ask some locals for assistance, highlights the poverty of Noriko’s childhood contrasted with the much safer, cleaner world of the Bubble Era, and in addition, foreshadows her own sad attempt at escape from ‘rules’ and ‘rulebreakers’ during the climax of the story. This image, as well as that of the recycling machine which literally ate up her father, seem to be comments by the writer on an unfair society. Masuda has commented that she was familiar with the filth and dangerousness of the old neighborhood and the harsh relationships between people since she grew up in Sumida Ward at the same time as the fictional Noriko (Yoshihiro, 1998, 1-2). She was also a “peculiar little girl” who became so frustrated with not being taken seriously (Kutsukake, 2004, 57) that she dropped out of a prestigious high school for a period of time (Kutsukake, 2004, 57). Given these parallels, and others which will be explained later, Masuda seems to be continuing in the Japanese tradition of semi-autobiographical literature (Morton, 2003, 160).

III. Noriko’s Stagnation in the Bubble Era

At the time of the story, Noriko lives alone in a small apartment, seemingly friendless. She
spends her evenings reading newspaper articles about the most shocking accidents; “one of her few pleasures;” (Masuda, 1991, 9) a telling indicator of her mental state considering that her father was accidentally shredded to death by a newspaper recycling machine (Masuda, 1991, 51). When Noriko’s neighbor, Sugio, starts banging on her door, Noriko feels she has no place to hide (Masuda, 1991, 39) from this “rough,” “loud,” “brash,” man who smells of machine oil and wears dirty work clothes (Masuda, 1991, 39). He is a kind of anti-Bubble, and therefore anti-establishment, character in that he is too cheap, too practical, too cynical and/or too poor to buy his own newspapers. He often asks to borrow Noriko’s, which annoys her greatly (Masuda, 1991, 39-40). However, Sugio suffers from the shock of witnessing a bizarre motorcycle accident of the affluent Bubble Era in which a young couple who have skipped school and are flirting are killed by their own carelessness. The change to Sugio is symbolized when he requests yet another newspaper from Noriko, this time getting down “on all fours” like an animal to read it, now desperate for an ‘official’ report of what he has seen (Masuda, 1991, 41-42). A semblance of a bond between Noriko and Sugio begins to develop because of their similar experiences with “violent deaths and insensitive witnesses” (Masuda, 1991, 47). Sugio offers Noriko movie tickets in exchange for the newspapers, and finally asks her on a date, which Noriko seems to be unconsciously pleased about in that she hums along to his whistling behind the closed door to her apartment after he has left (Masuda, 1991, 47).

The counterpart to Sugio is Tsukamoto, a 26-year-old man in Noriko’s office. Since he is fawned over by young, unmarried, female workers (Masuda, 1991, 44-45), the reader can infer that he has the external qualities of an ideal marriage partner: attractiveness, a proper family background, and education (Kumagai, 1996, 32). He is initially described as being hardworking and cheerful, but gradually becomes more sinister when Noriko confronts him about his breaking the office rules by not washing his own teacup (Masuda, 1991, 45). Noriko’s office seems to be superficially progressive in that they have a rule in which female employees are forbidden from having to wash up after males. However, when Tsukamoto repeatedly breaks this rule, sometimes because he is simply busy, other times because he is being selfish, his infractions are ignored by others so that Noriko challenges him in passive-aggressive ways. Tsukamoto’s response in Japanese gives him away when he says, “Datte ocha wo ireta koto nanka umarete kara ichido mo nain desu yo, boku” (Masuda, 1985, 14); using a personal pronoun (boku), sentence construction (datte), and word ending (nain) commonly used by young male children to explain that he’s never once made tea in his life (Masuda, 1991, 45). Noriko continues to push him, moving the dirty teacup he’s left in the sink back onto his desk with anonymous notes telling him to wash it himself (Masuda,
Since Noriko has a reputation for being a “sullen” and “mean” troublemaker, everyone knows it is she who is ‘harassing’ Tsukamoto about a “trivial” matter (Masuda, 1991, 45). Noriko even has a vision of her father chiding her for her actions against Tsukamoto (Masuda, 1991, 58), indicating that perhaps he was not as progressive than Noriko consciously believed him to be. Tsukamoto seems amazed by Noriko’s behavior, and in a surprising counterattack, finally asks her on a date—on the same night as Sugio. While the reader can see that Tsukamoto is quite threatening in that he plans to “teach” Noriko how to be “a real woman” on their date (Masuda, 1991, 59), chillingly reminiscent of the childhood molester who “taught” Noriko about kissing (Masuda, 1991, 50), Noriko cannot bring herself to turn him down— in spite of (or because of) her distrust of all men due to her experience of childhood molestation (Masuda, 1991, 59).

IV. The Story’s Conclusion: Return to the Past

The dilemma of making dates with two men on the same night causes Noriko to enter in a PTSD-inspired emotional spiral towards panic. At first she entertains some “silly” fantasies in which she enjoys imagining manipulating both Tsukamoto and Sugio for her benefit. Her frustration at the ironic, pathetic outcomes of such fantasizing, such as successfully becoming the hated office matron, then causes her to bolt towards the familiarity of her old neighborhood (Masuda, 1991, 62).

As Noriko crosses the symbolic bridge over the Sumida River, a black shadow crosses her sight and her heart begins to pound yet again (Masuda, 1991, 62-63). She seemingly entertains suicidal thoughts when she notices that it would be easy to jump from the bridge (Masuda, 1991, 63). Yet when Noriko meets a boy walking on the railing, she tells him to stop because it’s dangerous, but is ignored (Masuda, 1991, 63-64). Then she threatens to get the police, but the boy just laughs (Masuda, 1991, 64). Since Noriko is being ignored once again in a manner reminiscent of Tsukamoto and the teacup incident, she becomes sinister and threatens the boy with two choices: come down or get pushed off (Masuda, 1991, 64). The boy chooses the safer option and runs away shouting how “crazy” Noriko is, in part a symbolic comment on how males break the rules and get away with it, but Noriko is labeled a troublemaker when she persistently pushes them to comply (Masuda, 1991, 64). Asking a boy to come down from a bridge railing is in fact a sympathetic gesture; yet that Noriko descends to the level of a violent threat is an indicator of her deteriorating mental state.
On the bridge is monument to Basho (Masuda, 1991, 64). The English version ends there, but the Japanese original contains an excerpt of a poem about continuing on a long journey despite one’s chest being clogged with emotion, symbolically rendering Noriko’s journey as well (Masuda, 1985, 44).

Noriko retreats into the alleys of her old neighborhood, much of which has changed under the affluence of the Bubble Era (Masuda, 1991, 65-68). The “darkness” deepens, her heartbeat quickens further, and she finds herself recognizing some points, but confused by others, questioning the validity of her own memories (Masuda, 1991, 65). In trying to return to the factory where her father was killed, she encounters a dark space she cannot recognize (Masuda, 1991, 66). She is lost in the “river” she had just previously thought of jumping into: in deliberately confusing post-modern style, the “darkness” itself is then described as flowing into the river (Masuda, 1991, 67). Noriko finds herself feeling her way around a fence, finally realizing this is not the factory itself, but the warehouse where papers (symbolically her memories and PTSD) were stored, and that the location of the symbolic front gate and fence are the opposite of what she remembers (Masuda, 1991, 67-68). Masuda has written this ending is such a confusing style that the reader may attempt to understand it by literally mapping out the neighborhood and Noriko’s path on a piece of paper, but still fails, ending up as lost and frustrated as the main character. Not only does Masuda’s ending symbolize Noriko’s lack of resolution, options, and therefore inability to move forward into the new era, it seems to be a symbol of the era itself in which returning to the past makes it darker than ever, and no one knows where the light of the future may be.

V. The Gender Gap at Work and at Home

Apparently in the Bubble Era there was a “...tendency for people at the bottom of the social and economic ladder to define themselves in opposition to the overwhelming standardization of the times” (Rosenberger, 2001, 110), which would explain Noriko’s retreat to her old neighborhood to recover her sense of self: Noriko’s minshu bunka, or identity “grounded in people’s locally specific lives,” had been superseded by the taishuu bunka (mass culture) of the Bubble Era (Iida, 2002, 174) and she sought to reclaim it. However, this story can also be read as a serious critique of the position of women at the time.

Upon the surprising success of finishing high school, thanks to both Noriko’s and her mother’s persistence, Noriko could have chosen from three main contemporary roles for women as “legiti-
mate nurturers” (Imamura, 1996, 8). She could have gotten married and been at least in part financially supported by a man, stayed single and worked at a low-level, low-paying office job with next to no chance of promotion for the rest of her life, or been employed in the higher-paying sex industry which would involve more freedom from community duties, but also more dangers (Rosenberger, 2001). Given that Noriko has problems with men as the result of a childhood molestation, it would seem for her to be impossible to choose marriage or sex work as life options. In addition, since the average age of marriage for Japanese women was 26 at this time, Noriko would have been considered a past-date ‘Christmas Cake’ no one wants to ‘buy;’ that is, marry, at age 36 (Kumagai, 1996, 31). In Japan sexuality was “not the center of personhood to which Freudian theories elevate it in the West” (Rosenberger, 2001, 53); nonetheless, it is in fact Noriko’s inability to relate to men, particularly in a sexual manner, which has severely limited her life options. Young women who had some financial support from their families could have attended university and perhaps entered the field of education as another kind of “legitimate nurturer” where they would have had some chance at an independent income nearly on par with men in the same field (Rosenberger, 2001). However, as mentioned earlier, Noriko and her mother struggled just to get her through high school, so that this option was also not open to her.

In the non-educational work sphere; however, women were “marginalized” from full participation in that they were ‘allowed’ to work for a short time as shokuba no hana (office flowers) in nurturing roles (Painter, 1996, 50-52). The average office operated under beliefs such as “young women were first and foremost sexually appealing, ...young women were too self-centered and dependent to take on big responsibilities,” and in the future, “their contribution to society would be to raise children so there was no point investing in them at their jobs” (Rosenberger, 2001, 198-199). Noriko seems to have had aspirations, and envies the brashness and energy of men who can boast about their accomplishments (Masuda, 1991, 60). However as someone in an officially abnormal position (Rosenberger, 2001, 236)—middle-aged, single, female, lower class, and sexually traumatized, it would be very difficult for Noriko to succeed in her office despite her best efforts. Noriko’s sullenness at work can in part be explained by her self-proclaimed “inferiority complex” (Masuda, 1991, 46), her personality, and her background, but it is surely influenced by men like Tsukamoto, who although ten years her junior, seems to consider all women his inferiors in that he (unconsciously) expects them to wash up after him at the office. In addition, Tsukamoto was guaranteed to go where Noriko could not: into the demands but security of “lifetime employment” with promotions and bonuses guaranteed according to seniority (McCormack, 1996, 81). Only 1% of
managerial positions were held by women as late as 1988 (Allison, 1996, 153), so that Noriko’s frustration at realizing that her “social mobility” had come to an end (Tiara in Rosenberger, 2001, 16) inspired her panic and breakdown.

Younger single women of the Bubble Era were sometimes lauded for their pursuit of “control over their lives” (AMPO in Rosenberger, 2001, 186) and at other times criticized for being “fixated ... on the individual experience” (Saito in Rosenberger, 2001, 189) via “mass consumption” of goods (AMPO in Rosenberger, 2001, 189) in “consumerist leisure culture” (McCormack, 1996, 105). Noriko is self-obsessed, at least in part due to her trauma, but indicates no interest in the materialistic pursuits of the Bubble, perhaps because she is not financially able to do so without the safety net of parental support that younger female office workers of the era generally enjoyed (Rosenberger, 2001, 182-213). Other women also focused on traditional hobbies to release pressure, find support, and create a sense of self beyond the one of duty (Rosenberger, 2001; Mori, 1996, 117-139), but Noriko may have been financially and psychologically unable to participate in such activities, leaving her to read her gruesome newspaper articles alone at night. Recognition of and treatment for PTSD, particularly in the form of peer-support groups seen today, might have helped her (Panzavino, 2007, 1-5), but were not culturally acceptable options in that era.

“Because Japan’s economy had succeeded, purportedly through Japanese culture, there was little tolerance of critique from within institutions, and little latitude for personal autonomy and self-determination” (Rosenberger, 2001, 20). Knowing how to recognize and maneuver differences was a mark of maturity (Bachnik in Rosenberger, 2001, 2), self-control and endurance were highly valued and a source of pride (Lock, 1996, 86), and expressing conflict was “disruptive” (Long, 1996, 162). Thus, everyday life required “a certain amount of skill in performance” (Rosenberger, 2001, 2). In addition, marriage was the ultimate goal as an indication of maturity (Rosenberger, 2001, 189). Although Noriko has achieved a certain amount of “economic and social independence” (Mock, 1996, 179) despite her troubles, if her life is measured from this contemporary Japanese perspective, she is a weak and selfish person because she cannot control her negativity about playing her role in it. She is extremely isolated and unsuccessful in that she has no family (husband, children, parents, or even extended relatives), no community, no hobbies, nor friends through which to build her “strength of character” which would both “garner esteem from others” and give her a measure of “self-respect” (Rosenberger, 2001, 59). However, if Noriko’s life is judged from a contemporary Western perspective, she is to be pitied for her lack of “freedom, equality, or individual determination” (Rosenberger, 2001, 59): stuck at a dead-end job which is limiting her sense
of self by refusing the opportunity for her to use and develop her own unique talents, simply because she is a woman.

The character of Noriko has been described by the English-language translator of *Sinking Ground* as a “prototype” of Masuda’s characters (Tanaka, 2008, 1) in addition to already being somewhat autobiographical in nature. Masuda (1986) says in a non-fiction work tellingly entitled “Flight from Womanhood” that she thought “she would grow up to be a man” and was disappointed that she didn’t have “the right” to choose her own gender, believing that only “crybaby girls” and “weakling boys” would end up as women. Eventually getting a high school diploma via part-time classes, she went on to university to study what she called “life”, or biology, while garnering various literary nominations and prizes along the way (Tomioka, 1989). It is here that Masuda’s and Noriko’s life trajectories separate: the damaged and isolated Noriko remains lost in the maze of her mind while the equally determined and unique Masuda transcends the limitations placed on women and is able to succeed as a writer. Masuda had the support of her family, particularly financial, which enabled her to go to university, along with literary talent and drive through which she published her first poem at age 18 (Kutsukake, 2004, 57). Noriko may be an extreme example of what Kutsukake (2004, 58) describes as a typical “post-family” female character who experiences both the freedom and pain of isolation caused by the Bubble Era’s disintegrating ie, or traditional Japanese extended family unit, but Masuda herself was significantly less so.

VI. The Gender Gap in Bubble-era Literature

Economic affluence allowed people “to realize the insufficiency in their quality of life” (Kumagai, 1996, 34). The characters in works by Shimada Masahiko (Mitsios, 1991, 1-22; Birnbaum, 1993, 113-146; Goosen, 1997, 113-146; Shimada, 1986, 4-28), Kobayashi Kyoji (Mitsios, 1991, 87-101; Birnbaum, 1993, 73-112), Takahashi Genichiro (Birnbaum, 1993, 49-72), and Takeno Masato (Birnbaum, 1993, 279-304) seem to be enjoying high quality in “health, economic stability, environment and safety” (Kumagai, 1996, 36) while suffering from a lack of community (Kumagai, 1996, 36). In such stories the main characters are middle- to upper-class males similar in age to Tsukamoto, who despite gender-based privileges, are seemingly satiated by affluence until they are isolated and lost in the maze that was the urban landscape of the Bubble Era. They literally break into bits in these stories (Shimada, 1986), become shut-ins (Birnbaum, 1993, 279-304), or go mad under the influence of the god of consumption (Birnbaum, 1993, 73-112), supporting Iida’s view that
community is identity and without either, humans are lost (Iida, 2002, 164-208).

Works by younger female writers in the Era were said to be “revolutionary” in nature (Awaya and Phillips, 1996, 244) in that the writers detailed their characters’ “search for a better quality of life and reaffirming images of identity” (Awaya and Phillips, 996, 246) with an “internal/spiritual focus” (Kumagai, 1996, 41). Writers like Yoshimoto Banana (Mitsios, 1991, 152-172; Yoshimoto, 1993) and Makino Eri (Birnbaum, 1993, 29-48) depict “marginalized” women (and men) achieving some kind of contentment or resolution by the end of their stories (Awaya and Phillips, 1996).

A study of the differences between young male and female short story writers of the era is beyond the scope of this paper, but a superficial glance suggests that this kind of gender division may be evident. Masuda’s Noriko; however, straddles the line. She is a woman unsuccessfully trying to fit into a man’s world—even though she may not truly want to fit into it, she has no other options. Lacking family, friends, or spirituality which normally offered financial and emotional support to women, she suffers a fate similar to younger male characters in that she ends up lost in a maze questioning the validity of her own memories. Whereas the younger male characters seem to have been born with no identity, the middle-aged Noriko desperately clings to her outdated and shameful one. The Bubble Era, then, cannot be transcended and is still a major cause of her ultimate disintegration.

VII. The Reality of the Merits of Bubble-era Literature

To the existentialist Oe, the moral purpose of literature is to enlighten “Japan and the Japanese to reality and culture (italics mine)” (Oe, 1989, 199). Literature’s role is “to create a model of a contemporary age which envelops past and future (italics mine) and a human model that lives in that age” (Oe, 1989, 193). What he hoped intellectuals would create was instead devoured by the “craze culture” (Oe, 1989, 192; Iida, 2002) of the “urbanized, average consumer” and his/her “middle-class consciousness” (Oe, 1989, 207), with nothing but products like TVs and cars remaining (Oe, 1989, 192). This is the society which spawned Oe’s despised, morally bereft “fuikkushon,” or fiction, (Birnbaum, 1991, 1) in which the whole world was “clever, compact, disposable” (Birnbaum, 1991, 2), impermanent and frenetically bored (Birnbaum, 1991, 3). Not only is Masuda’s Sumida Bridge a symbol of the gap between a specific female character’s past and present, it can also be seen as a symbol of the gap between “pure” literature and Bubble-era fuikkushon (Suzuki, 1994, 274), and thereby, post-war and Bubble-era Japan. Ironically, Masuda bridges the gap be-
tween the reader and the character by literally "losing" them in the past; creating such an incomprehensibly frustrating ending that both are stuck there, unable to understand it or to move forward into the future. Oe might in fact admire Masuda’s story as “pure” literature up until its Bubble-era ending of disintegration. The era’s "reality" was its actual void of "culture." This void, caused by a lack of community (and thereby identity), resulted in confused searching for, but often failure to find, a future. Since Masuda’s story is a skillfully-crafted, intellectual, Bubble-era illumination of all that Oe hated about the era and its literature, surely then even he could give it the artistic credit it deserves.

1 Although the story itself alternates between Noriko’s past and present experiences, for the sake of clarity this report will separate her life story into two separate sections.

2 The translator, Tanaka Yukiko (2008, 1), wrote that she chose to delete some sections of the original story for literary reasons, to reduce length, and for cultural reasons in that most English-language readers would not understand some points without a great deal of explanation. For the purposes of illustrating Noriko’s situation; however, these deleted sections are included in this paper.

Bibliography


Bridging the Gap between Gender and Generation: Masuda Mizuko: Falling Ground as a Fictional Case Study of a Woman Caught in Societal Transition in a Society Which Allows Her No Options for Transition.


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