

Excerpt from the chapter on Japanese literature after Fukushima.

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## **Japanese Literature After Fukushima – Between Protest and ‘Healing’** (August 2012)

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For over a year the Japanese cultural scene has been dealing now with the Great East Japan Earthquake (*Higashi Nihon daishinsai*) and its consequences. Japanese authors and artists of various fields see it as their urgent task to find words that—‘after Fukushima’ —somehow measure up to a catastrophe of historic scale. Many appeal to the longstanding responsibility of the nation in the realm of atomic power and declare that with the Fukushima-disaster an irreversible paradigm shift has begun. They are protesting against a ‘Japanese system’ whose failures are not limited to the damaged nuclear plant, insisting that a day of reckoning has come for development in Japan since 1945. Others seek above all to show their solicitousness and to encourage the victims in Tōhoku, facilitating local reconstruction, and clearing a horizon of hope for the future of the nation. In the meantime there has been a greater number of poems, short stories, essays, and novels or other longer prose pieces, thereby offering an interesting body in the Heisei Era of so-called ‘earthquake catastrophe literature’ (*shinsai-bungaku*) [...]

With this attitude it may for socio-psychological reasons be indeed undesirable for neighbours to express their anxieties or to move to a safer region, even though officially the cold shutdown has been put into effect as a ‘safety declaration’ (*anzen sengen*). Here too the writers play their pioneering role by questioning directives and frequently relate their understandable concerns. Successful author Kanehara Hitomi (1983-), winner of the 2003 Akutagawa Prize, who in the meantime has become the mother of two children, declared in the evening edition of the *Tōkyō Shimbun*, October 11, 2011, that she is advocating the abolition of all nuclear power in the country. She calls for contaminated food not be approved or be allowed to threaten the welfare of

children. The government should assume the costs of moving and accommodating those living in areas that are at risk. Kanehara bewails the inability of those in authority to take appropriate action. Even a prime minister or the emperor himself would be ignored if they spoke out against nuclear energy. Demonstrations, she says, would probably be equally ineffective. Moreover, she says, there are already many people who have stopped contemplating the dangers of radioactivity: Whereas we are incapable of controlling radioactivity, we ourselves come to be controlled by something else. We are afraid of the reactions of our fellow human beings and ‘intuit the ambience’ (*kūki wo yomu*) in order then to be caught (*torawarete iru*) in that coercive reality, which we have created together with others who have adapted to it. There is thus no resistance. People who are in that condition are simply slaves—and masterless slaves to boot. Kanehara herself is withdrawing from group pressure and admits that in fear of radiation she has moved to Okayama and there given birth to her second daughter [...]

A preliminary conclusion that can be drawn in July 2012 is that the direction of post-Fukushima literature is toward greater frankness, and towards a renaissance of what was formally known as an engaged author or an intellectual, which could in its best version be a modus of critical reflection without the predominant intention to succeed in the media market. Some of the recent statements of Japanese authors show an astonishing courage to practice poignant Japan-criticism and to disclose some disagreeable tendencies in contemporary Japanese society. Henmi Yô's hint at an encroaching nationalistic atmosphere following the disaster attest to a new watchfulness and a feeling of responsibility towards the national mental state on the side of representatives of the Japanese literary scene. Insofar, authors fulfill the maybe antiquated role of asking for moral issues [...]

A ‘trauma cure-and-healing literature’, such as Yoshimoto is indebted to, likewise has – although as a clear product of the Japanese consumer industry – its place within Japanese literary endeavors since Fukushima. If this does indeed turn out to have a bibliotherapeutic and trauma-easing effect, it will prove to have a function on its own [...]

Meanwhile, post-Fukushima literature has produced quite a number of ‘good books’ which cover a broad range of topics such as the confrontation with a ‘waste land’, with the wreckage, the lingering feeling of threat, life in the emergency accommodations, the preserving of memory of the dead, fear of radiation, damages done by radiation, discrimination of Fukushima-victims, flight from Japan, the hope for recovery and the strength of a community; some texts, as explained above, articulate an unabashed critique of Japan as a failed system that needed to be restarted only after a thorough examination. A French article entitled ‘Il y a clairement un avant et un après Fukushima dans la littérature japonaise’ [There is clearly a pre-Fukushima and post-Fukushima in Japanese literature] (Allemandou 2012). It will be interesting to see, what sort of writings will continue to appear in the coming years and – as with the remarkable ‘Hydrangea Revolution’ of June 2012 – what sort of topics, such as distrust in authorities, active participation in democracy, and communication with the global community, will be able to develop as both in literary texts and in the form of political essays. In a decade we may see the formation of a new generation of Japanese atomic literature, or an environmental literature (*kankyô bungaku*) of the Heisei-era that continues the tradition of Ishimure [...]