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## **Yamamba's Amorphous Self and the Marginal Space in Ohba Minako's Stories**

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YAMAMBA'S AMORPHOUS SELF AND THE MARGINAL SPACE IN OHBA  
MINAKO'S STORIES

A Thesis Presented

by

KATSUYA IZUMI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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## ABSTRACT

YAMAMBA'S AMORPHOUS SELF AND THE MARGINAL SPACE IN OHBA  
MINAKO'S STORIES

MAY 2020

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This thesis deals with how Ohba Minako, a Japanese woman author who was prolific in the late twentieth century, uses a Japanese female *yōkai* (or “supernatural monster”) called yamamba (often translated into “mountain witch”) in order to produce a non-hierarchical community in her short stories and novels. Yamamba are usually depicted as old women who lure lost male travelers in the mountains into their huts in order to eat them. Therefore, feminist scholars analyze this figure from a feminist perspective as a reflection of misogyny in the patriarchal society. Acknowledging the usefulness and validity of the feminist approach and expanding it into viewing vagabonds and immigrants’ marginal communities, I will focus on how Ohba emphasizes the yamamba’s amorphous self, which I will explain constantly changes and thus carries the potential to transcend the border between the self and the other. Ohba’s depictions of yamamba as a mind-reader and women who speak with a language that does not belong to any specific nations or races are, I will argue, all part of her efforts to highlight the

social injustices of putting individuals into certain molds of identities and her declarations to oppose to them as a woman and as a foreigner who lived in immigrants' communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE SCOURCES OF YAMAMBA AND THE AMORPHOUS SELF

In her study of a Noh drama titled “Yamamba,” Wakita Haruko discusses the origin of yamamba,<sup>1</sup> a Japanese supernatural monster or *yōkai*, which is hinted at in a story from *Sarashina nikki* (*Sarashina Diary*, circa 1059) about *asobime* (women entertainers) who seem to live in Mount Ashigara. When the author of the diary, the daughter of Sugawara no Takasue, steps into the mountain with her party, she comes across three *asobime* who entertain them by singing songs in beautiful voices. Wakita introduces them as one of the sources from which yamamba later came out. She finds it important that these entertainers return deep into Mount Ashigara because Sakata Kintoki, who is one of the four most trusted retainers of Minamoto no Yoritomo (948-1021), better known as Raikō, and who is also a model of Kintarō, one of the Japanese well-known folktale heroes, is said to be a child of a yamamba in the mountain. To continue to explain the sources of yamamba, Wakita compares *asobime* with *kairaishi*, who were vagrants travelling and entertaining people by using dolls called *kairai*. Through this link, Wakita considers yamamba to be a descendent of those entertainers and travelers who live somewhere in the mountains. Wakita introduces Ōe Masafusa’s (1041-1111) *Kairaishi ki* (*The Record of Kairaishi*) which was written about twenty to thirty years after *Sarashina nikki* because it fully explores *kairaishi*’s traits. According to the record, Wakita explains:

They lead a drifting life moving from one mountain to another, without settling in a place, without farming, growing silkworms, or weaving fabric. Therefore, they, the *Record* writes, do not pay taxes because they do not belong to any dominion. In short, they are “free” people who live in the mountains without having any

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas I italicize Japanese words in this thesis, I do not italicize yamamba because I use this word many times as this is the topic of this entire thesis.

relationships with the dominant people. They can be said to have become entertainers to make their livings by changing their life styles that used to depend on gathering food by hunting and fishing.<sup>2</sup>

If we consider that yamamba draw on these traits of *kairaishi* as a people of “freedom,” we can also regard yamamba as monsters that do not belong to dominant communities because they move from one place to another in the mountains.

When Mizuta Noriko defines yamamba in relation to the significance of a mountain’s topography, her version of the yamamba may have the traits of *kairaishi* as the source of yamamba who refuse to settle in one place:

Yamamba is not a woman in the settlement. She is a woman who cannot be enclosed by the settlement. Whereas a woman in the settlement is the one who sets down her roots in a place, yamamba is a woman who moves. She lives in the mountain, but does not stay in a place; she freely moves here and there, and for people in the settlement, she appears in unexpected places. The mountain, in the first place, ranges uninterruptedly and resist being territorialized by the use of enclosure. It is also difficult to tame the humans and animals living there.<sup>3</sup>

The yamamba’s unreduceable identity is linked with the trait of the mountain that she inhabits. As a feminist critic, Mizuta places the yamamba in the mountain in contrast to the women in the settlement, or the women who belong to families, in order to argue that Japanese women writers such as Ohba Minako, Tsushima Yuko, Enchi Fumiko use yamamba to produce female characters who do not conform to patriarchal society. I will discuss the importance of yamamba in order to suggest that Ohba uses the yamamba to

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<sup>2</sup> Wakita Haruko, “Yamamba no mai – Nōgaku “Yamamba” ni miru onna tachi no geinō no dentō” 山姥の舞—能楽『山姥』にみる女たちの芸能の伝統 [The Yamamba’s Dance – the Traditions of Women’s Entertainments in Noh Drama ‘Yamamba’], in *Yamamba tachi no monogatari — Jyosei no genkei to katari naoshi* 『山姥たちの物語—女性の原型と語りなおし』 [Yamamba’s Tales: Women’s Archetype and Recurred Telling], ed. Mizuta Noriko and Kitada Sachie (Tokyo: Gakugei shorin, 2002), 51. All translations from this book are mine hereafter.

<sup>3</sup> Mizuta Noriko, “Yamamba no yume — Jyoron toshite” 山姥の夢—序論として [The Yamamba’s Dream as Introduction], in *Yamamba tachi no monogatari*, 10.

oppose the hierarchical society. Because yamamba is considered a female *yōkai*, or a supernatural monster, scholars in Japanese literary studies such as Mizuta Noriko, Kobayashi Fukuko, Meera Viswanathan, among others have discussed yamamba in feminist contexts. Following their feminist approaches to yamamba, I will expand the preceding study of this literary figure by emphasizing how Ohba links yamamba with the marginal trait of the mountain, the woods, and the vagabonds and immigrants' societies, in which the confine of one's particular identity becomes fluid. By so doing, Ohba empowers the words of minorities who are compared with yamamba. In this thesis, I will especially focus on Ohba Minako's characters who do not have strong longings for their homes.

As a daughter of a naval doctor, Ohba Minako lived in different places in Japan after she was born in Shibuya, Tokyo in 1930. While she was attending a high school in Hiroshima Prefecture, she joined the rescue group for the victims of the atomic bomb in the Hiroshima city and went there near the end of August 1945. Witnessing the aftermath of the atomic bomb later influenced her writing to a great extent. She went to high school in Yamaguchi and then, in Niigata, about which she writes a lot in her novels. She went to Tsuda University in Tokyo to study English literature. Although she did not publish her first novel until she moved to Alaska with her husband in 1968, she had wanted to write stories since her childhood. Many of the female protagonists in her novels have the same desire. In her debut novel, *The Three Crabs (Sanbiki no kani, 1968)* that earned her the prestigious Akutagawa Award, Ohba creates the female main character Yuri who cannot feel comfortable with her social community in Alaska. Ohba surprised her readers in Japan by writing about a woman who freely speaks with her husband and her friends

about her sexual relationship; the fact that she seems to have a one-night stand with a stranger nonchalantly at the end of the story was also shocking to them. Many of her works feature female characters who sleep with multiple men even when they are married. Their sexual liberations are linked with their attempts to escape from the conservative and patriarchal notion that women have to stay with their family and to take care of their husbands and children. Naturally, some of Ohba's characters who are compared to yamamba sleep with multiple men and do not stay in their homes.

Moving to different places, living in a foreign country, and writing from the perspective that one does not belong to a certain community are important elements in Ohba's works. She wrote many stories about people who live in foreign countries, expatriates and immigrants. Her eleven-year experience of living in Alaska plays an important role in her work, and much of her oeuvre originates in her relationships with people whom she encountered there. Perhaps, because of the peripheral nature of Alaska as well as her lived experiences as a foreigner and as a woman, Ohba's works often focus on decentralized and silenced people with strong-willed women as main characters. Since her female characters often discuss the many differences between women and men, they are seen as outspoken. She often compares her female characters to yamamba, and this represents Ohba's feminist resistance to the male-centered society. Nonetheless, the reader needs to remember that Ohba emphasizes the setting of the foreign lands and the woods in which she lives in order to underscore that her characters and their surroundings are closely linked. Her yamamba-like characters seem to experience escaping from their individual confinements into their background scenery. Keeping in mind the traditional yamamba's ability of moving freely between different places and that the topography of

the mountain is seen as no man's land, I will contend that Ohba argues that the importance of the literary figure yamamba resides in her potential to break the dichotomy between the self and the other. Through her use of yamamba, she creates amorphous selves of her characters that lead to solving the problems of chauvinism as well as patriarchy.

In her dialogue with Ohba about yamamba, Mizuta Noriko states, “[c]ompared with the European culture that is against the witch, Japanese culture, it can be said, has a higher level of tolerance for the yamamba. While revising the yamamba's image in the context of Buddhist thought, Japanese culture has brought her to the village and made her assimilate with the villagers, for instance.”<sup>4</sup> Mizuta's interpretation of how Japanese culture has dealt with yamamba is valid when it is compared to the European culture's harsh treatment of witches who were often burned to death, but it is still important to remember that yamamba could only live in the marginal villages in Japan. While touching upon how the figure of yamamba has been constructed on the margin, however, I will suggest that the reader should be careful understanding the meaning of the marginal territory for Ohba's work. In her discussion of the medieval Noh drama *Yamamba*, Noriko T. Reider points out that the play introduces the title character as “a being ‘with birthplace unknown [and] lodgings uncertain,’” and continues, “the core concept of the Noh yamamba is the transcendental philosophy of non-dualism epitomized in the Heart Sutra (*Hannya shinkyō* 般若心経), perhaps the best-known text of Buddhism's Wisdom

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<sup>4</sup> Minako Ohba and Noriko Mizuta, *Taidan “Yamamba” no iru fūkei* 対談〈山姥〉のいる風景 [Conversations: The Scenery in Which Yamamba Reside] (Tokyo: Tabata Shoten, 1995), 145. All translations from this book are mine hereafter.

literature,” following Baba Akiko’s explanation of the theme of the Noh play.<sup>5</sup> Reider introduces the notion that yamamba are similar to immigrants, an idea that haunted Ohba’s mind when she was writing. In *The Three Crabs*, when Frank Stein, an American visitor who comes to the female Japanese protagonist Yuri’s house for a card-game party, says, “you are gypsies and don’t have roots anywhere, although you claim to be Japanese,” Yuri, who lives in Alaska, retorts, “that’s why we can sing so beautifully.”<sup>6</sup> If Ohba thinks that immigrants have poetic power because they “don’t have roots anywhere,” the yamamba can also sing beautiful songs because her birthplace is unknown and lodgings are uncertain. Rather than focusing on the yamamba’s residence in the mountains, the mystery of her home, beginning, or origin is more important for Reider to make a link between yamamba and immigrants.

Drawing upon Meera Viswanathan’s analysis of yamamba and Mathias Guenther’s of the trickster, Michiko N. Wilson describes yamamba as: “a man-eating demon, a shape-shifter, both a victimizer and a victim, she [yamamba] is the embodiment of ambiguity and chaos, representing an amorphous world, reminiscent of a trickster’s universe ‘in which amorphousness and flux are the basic principles of (dis)order and (anti)structure’ (Guenther 23).”<sup>7</sup> Following how Wilson describes “a trickster’s universe,” I use the word “amorphous” to modify the self of yamamba in this thesis. The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first two definitions of “amorphous” read “Having no

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<sup>5</sup> Noriko T. Reider, “Yamauba: Representation of the Japanese Mountain Witch in the Muromachi and Edo Periods,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2005): 243.

<sup>6</sup> Minako Ohba, “The Three Crabs,” in *This Kind of Woman: Ten Stories by Japanese Women Writers, 1960-1976*, ed. and trans., Yukiko Tanaka and Elizabeth Hanson (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), 96.

<sup>7</sup> Michiko N. Wilson, “Oba Minako the Raconteur: Refashioning a Yamauba Tale,” *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013): 220.

definite shape or form, shapeless; unshaped. Also: irregularly shaped, misshapen” (first) and “Without reference to shape: having no definite character or nature; of a shifting or changing nature; lacking organization, order, or unity” (second). To clarify, I do not intend to attach any negative connotations such as “misshapen” or “lacking” to the images of yamamba; rather, the yamamba’s “amorphous” self is “of a shifting or changing nature” to the extent that she can transcend her individual border, which is thus made “fluid.” When I use “fluid” to modify her self, I mainly refer to the border or the circumference of her self; when I use “amorphous,” I refer to the nature or the quality of her self. To return to Wilson, the yamamba’s “amorphous” self is the principle of “(anti)structure” which goes against the power, the definite, and the dominant.

Wilson then pays attention to how Ohba “refashion[s] the image of the female demon whose ambiguous nature clearly embodies a betwixt-and-between, neither-here-nor-there liminal space and time.”<sup>8</sup> While I agree with Wilson’s argument about the yamamba’s ambiguous traits in Ohba’s text, my purpose is to explain with more clarification than previous studies on Ohba’s yamamba the way in which the demonic character is used to extirpate essentialism. By this, I mean that with her clear purpose of empowering women’s voices by writing her novels, Ohba does not try to define any images of strong women; but rather, she is careful enough to obfuscate the difference between the self and the other to avoid putting women back into a certain mold. In addition, I will look at Ohba’s position as a semi-immigrant as the source of her strong and persuasive revisions of yamamba in order to express her literary stance against delineating the confinements of nations, races, and genders, as well as individuals.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 221.

For Ohba, the importance of yamamba is obvious because she uses this figure from Japanese folklore tradition many times in her works such as *Funakui mushi* (*Shipworm* 1970), *Toga no yume* (*Hemlock's Dream* 1971), *Kiri no tabi* (*A Journey through the Mist* 1980), and *Umi ni yuragu ito* (*A Thread Floating in the Ocean* 1989). In this thesis, I will first focus on Ohba's two short pieces about yamamba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" and "Candle Fish," both of which are translated into English. The mere choice of yamamba as her topic already demonstrates that these stories express Ohba's opinions about Japanese literary tradition and her literary philosophy. The former, I will specify, uses the mountain witch as a character who has the power of writing, which she uses to nullify the distinction between the self and the other by embodying "a betwixt-and-between, neither-here-nor-there liminal space and time," to use Wilson's words. The latter more expressively puts forth Ohba's stance toward the benefits of observing objects from the distant and marginal space not only because the first-person narrator lives in a foreign country but also because she says,

I was born and raised in Japan, an ancient country with a long history, but when I lived there [sic] I had never felt like an old cedar. Yet when I separated from my country a strange part of me, which seemed to have been covered by moss before, revealed itself. I became aware of a power inside me, informing me of things I had no way of knowing.<sup>9</sup>

Considering that the narrator of "Candle Fish" is also a writer (therefore, many read her as Ohba herself), one can suggest that the "power inside me" is the power of writing, which only has been revealed because she is away "from [her] country." The power is also expressed by her feeling "like an old cedar" that is associated with the Japanese "ancient" and "long history." In other words, she refers to herself as a Japanese writer,

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<sup>9</sup> Ohba Minako, "Candle Fish," in *Unmapped Territories: New Women's Fiction from Japan*, ed. and trans. Yukiko Tanaka (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1991), 23.



who becomes visible to her writing self in a “separate” land or from a marginal point of view. For Ohba, the yamamba’s view and the immigrant’s view are powerful to the same extent in that they can reveal what would remain “covered by moss” or hidden if it were viewed from its birthplace.

In order to link the voices of immigrants with those of yamamba, what Ohba says about whose voice she utters is helpful. When she wrote *Katachi mo naku* (*With No Shapes*) in 1982, she wrote her purpose of writing: “I have been writing in order to express what on earth has motivated me to write,” and she continues, “My writing has been done in half-dreams and I cannot be sure if that is my utterance or others’ utterance”<sup>10</sup> when she is satisfied with her writing. This kind of gesture to obfuscate the border between the self and the other through her writing, I will argue, is closely linked with the yamamba who is not rooted anywhere and who, therefore, is able to change her forms as a supernatural monster to move freely.

In her “The Soul of Vagabond” (*Furōnin no Tamashii*), Ohba expresses her thoughts about what literature should do and describes the act of observing from vagabonds’ points of views from the peripheral as a courageous one:

Literatures of all ages and countries have been proud of the soul of vagabond. Many literary scholars are resistant to the authority and choose to lead a journey as a vagabond rather than succumbing to the authority and settling down in one place. . . . The role of literature is to utter words that people have not uttered because they wanted to protect themselves. In a sense, artists’ works are often dream stories about unknown countries. I am not speaking about the places that are set for them. They [Artists] create their own worlds in order to express their wills. This is because expressing truths in the real world is prohibited since that is

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<sup>10</sup> Ohba Minako, “Nani ga watashi wo ugokashite iruka” 何が私を動かしているか [What is Motivating Me], in *Ohba Minako Zenshū Vol.10* 大庭みな子全集 第十巻 [*Ohba Minako Anthologies Vol.10*] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1991), 112. All translations from this volume are mine hereafter.

dangerous.<sup>11</sup>

This is Ohba's declaration against settling down in a place as a literary scholar. She also thinks of the distance between herself and what she observes as an important element of her literary project because she says about Nabokov's works: "His works move American people's hearts because he is able to see relentlessly what people who have grown up in America are not able to see."<sup>12</sup> Living in Alaska, Ohba might have been able to see various aspects of the yamamba, not just as the typical image of a scary female witch who eats lost travelers. The "margin" I use in the title of this thesis is not a marginalized space because part of this project is to show how Ohba turns the passivity associated with women, vagabonds, and immigrants into active and powerful agents. I will analyze what Ohba wants to achieve by using her characters who can move smoothly and freely in the marginal space.

Focusing on one of Ohba's most well-known stories, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," my first chapter deals with the protagonist yamamba's lamentations. This short story is ambitious because Ohba brings the yamamba out of the marginal territory in which she can move freely to depict a housewife of a family in the modern world. The story's yamamba lives in a real society. Ohba emphasizes her ability to read others' minds, and I will argue that the project of the yamamba as a mind-reader is to transcend the individual borders between the self and the other. In contrast to the following two chapters of this thesis, I will suggest that Ohba accentuates the yamamba's mind-reading ability by linking it to her amorphous self, which contains multiple identities, through her

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<sup>11</sup> Ohba Minako, "Furōnin no tamashii" 浮浪人の魂 [The Soul of Vagabond], in *Ohba Minako Zenshū Vol. 10*, 128-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

lamentations over the fact that the multiplicities are suppressed underneath the society's norms and prejudices against her.

My second chapter discusses the short story "Candle Fish," which Ohba wrote in 1986 and later became a chapter in *Umi ni yuragu ito* in 1989. The narrator of the short story imagines herself as a yamamba who can speak an enigmatic language called the "candle fish language" to communicate with her friend Tsukiko. Pointing out that the language does not belong to any specific race or nation, I will explore how the yamamba's trait of rootlessness is important in relation to the language in order to suggest that the narrator gains the creative power as an author to create her characters in her imagination by becoming a yamamba. Yukiko Tanaka, the story's translator, states, "Although the yamanba commonly appears in legends as an old woman, Ohba sees her as ageless; she articulates repressed desires, and is the embodiment of all women who defy the constricting rules of society."<sup>13</sup> In Japanese legends and folklore, the yamamba traditionally is depicted as an old woman who lives in the mountain and who seduces and eats male travelers lost in the woods. According to Tanaka, Ohba revises this traditional understanding about the yamamba into something applicable to women who do not conform to patriarchal society. Unlike the yamamba in "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," who moves to the real society in modern Japan, the yamamba narrator seems to stay in her imaginary world, which, nonetheless, is closely related to the immigrant society depicted in *Umi ni yuragu ito*. I will argue that Ohba's creativity does not reside in yamamba's desire to eat male travelers, which can be taken as a manifestation of the strong sense of the self, but in her attempts to encourage her characters to maintain

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<sup>13</sup> Yukiko Tanaka, "Introduction," in *Unmapped Territories: New Women's Fiction from Japan*, ed. and trans. Yukiko Tanaka (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1991), xii-xiii.

amorphous selves that can transcend individual borders. Ohba uses a marginal perspective as if she wants to emphasize that the yamamba can “sing beautiful songs” because she is not rooted in a particular space.

My third chapter focuses on Ohba’s long novel *Kiri no tabi*. Among the three works that I mainly discuss in this thesis, this novel most directly links the traits of the marginal space in which the yamamba can move freely with the fluid confine of the self that she can relish. Placing the narrator Yurie in the woods in foreign countries, Ohba describes an evaporation of her self into nature, which I link with the fact that she is compared to a yamamba in the woods. *Kiri no tabi* brings the yamamba’s transcendence between the self and the other, which Ohba underscores through the yamamba’s lamentations in “The Smile of a Mountain Witch,” to a larger perspective through which she observes the relationship between human and nature. Touching upon the importance of the primitive language (*kotoba*) that Ohba elaborates when she speaks about her life in Alaska in relation to her literary project, I maintain that Ohba finds the possibility to live as freely as the yamamba in the community of the immigrants or the vagabonds and expresses it by writing the novel. I conclude that she brings the imaginary world of “Candle Fish” to the real world of immigrants in *Kiri no tabi*.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE MIND-READER YAMAMBA IN “THE SMILE OF A MOUNTAIN WITCH”**

Ohba’s “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” was first published in a literary magazine *Shincho* in 1976. Many Ohba scholars have written about this short story partly because she uses “yamamba” in the title and partly because she brings the yamamba to the modern society in this story. The story depicts the life of a woman from her youth to her death by presenting her as a yamamba. Starting with the scene in which a lost traveler visits the yamamba’s hut in the mountain only to escape from her, Ohba reconfigures of the sufferings of the yamamba by making her a “normal” woman who is able to read others’ minds. When the yamamba is a daughter, she tries to please people by saying what others want her to say; after she grows up and has her family, she also has to suppress what she wants to say because of her family and society’s certain expectations of her. Ironically, the third-person narrator explains that she has the happiest moment of her life when she develops arteriosclerosis and is hospitalized because her family members have to take care of her if only for a short while. Eventually, she dies in a hospital bed with an ambiguous smile on her face while her husband and two children are crying besides the bed. This is a sad story about the yamamba who is victimized in the society that does not allow her to speak freely. Consequently, the yamamba laments a lot over the fact that she cannot use her ability to read minds of others who are always trying to put her into certain molds. Scholars have read this story as a metaphor for women’s oppression in postwar Japanese society.

Not only was Ohba a feminist author, but she was also a fighter against social injustice, and this played out in many of her works. Adrienne Hurley explains, “her [Ohba’s] fiction is highly politicized in its rejection of traditional marriage practices,

nationalized racisms and sexism, and the arbitrary separation of certain modes of spiritual practice or expression, such as witchcraft, from the dominant culture and its sanctioned religions.”<sup>14</sup> If Ohba’s project is to empower the voice of the marginalized, her method to achieve this purpose is to nullify the “arbitrary separation” between the man and the woman, white and black, center and margin, and by extension, the self and other, which give birth to the hierarchies that are the basis of social injustice. In this chapter, I argue that in the story Ohba emphasizes the yamamba’s lamentations about being imposed a certain kind of identity in the society because Ohba’s yamamba, who is described to go through multiple metamorphoses and to carry multiple identities, works for nullifying the separation between the self and other by reading others’ minds.

The reader can understand that Ohba’s narrator supports this project to transcend the dichotomy between the self and the other if they pay close attention to the first sentence of the story. “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” begins with a sentence-length paragraph that says, “Yamamba no hanashi wo shiyō.” This verb ending (-yō) can express both the narrator’s volition and invitation: “I will speak about the yamamba” or “Why don’t we speak about the yamamba?” The former conveys a strong ego of the narrator while the latter is her gesture to share the role of narrating with others who are her listeners. The story’s first sentence carries these oppositional gestures at the same time in order to reinforce that her words and those of others’ mingle with each other. The narrator starts this story by decentralizing herself. Placing the yamamba in the mountains and later moving her to the modern society, Ohba clearly rewrites the figure of yamamba

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<sup>14</sup> Adrienne Hurley, “Demons, Transnational Subjects, and the Fiction of Ohba Minako,” in *Oe and Beyond: Fiction in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 96.

by having the narrator reveal what she, along with the yamamba, tries to do in the mountains and by depicting that failed project through the yamamba's lamentations in the society.

The beginning of "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" describes the traditional setting of the yamamba legend by introducing a young male traveler who has lost his way in the mountain and ends up staying in the house of an "eerie hag of a woman."<sup>15</sup> The old woman is a yamamba typically described as a monster that devours travelers lost in the woods. This image of yamamba as a devouring monster, however, is only one type among many others. As Kawai Hayao notes in his study of the relationship between Japanese folklore and psychology, some yamambas save lost travelers and bring them back to their villages; he also points out the close relationship between yamamba and food. Kawai explains that some of them show up as "goddesses of harvest" who provide foods to humans.<sup>16</sup> It seems problematic that modern readers do not hesitate to link the image of yamamba to a scary old monster who eats humans while Japanese folklore sometimes put them in a positive light. Although the man in Ohba's "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" fears that the old woman plans to devour him, his fear of the yamamba stems more from her ability to read his mind. On the first pages of the text, the witch repeats saying exactly what the man says to himself in his mind to him three times. As if the narrator wants to emphasize the yamamba's ability as a mind-reader, she generalizes, "In any case, these old mountain witches are able to read a person's mind every time, and

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<sup>15</sup> Minako Ohba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," in *Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction*, trans. and ed. Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden (New York: Routledge, 1991) 194.

<sup>16</sup> Hayao Kawai, *Mukashi banashi to nihonjin no kokoro* 昔話と日本人の心 [*Folklore and Japanese Mind*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1982), 51-52. The translation is mine.

in the end the victim runs for his life away from her abode. The old witch pursues him, and the man just keeps running for his life. At least this is the form the classic mountain-witch tales assume.”<sup>17</sup>

This passage introduces the yamamba tradition, which includes the witches’ activity of reading men’s minds but not her activity of devouring them. Thus, I read Ohba’s “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” as her attempt to revise the modern and rather misogynistic interpretation of yamamba as the devourer of men’s flesh into the devourer of men’s words, and by extension, of texts. Ohba empowers the yamamba by possessing the man’s words. For example, the witch’s activity of repeating what the man says in the story gives us an impression that she still depends on what he says even though what she repeats back to him scares him away. This reading, however, seems too simple if we remember that the story first uses what she says to the man instead of using what the man thinks in his mind. To wit, after the narrator says the yamamba’s formidable description, the yamamba says to the man, “You just thought ‘What an uncanny woman she is! Like an old, monster cat! didn’t you?’”<sup>18</sup> Besides the narrator’s description of the witch, her fearsome appearance does not come from the impression made by the man but from her own depiction of herself as “an uncanny woman” and “an old, monster cat.” Interestingly, the “monster cat” shows up in what the man says to himself: “This monster cat of a woman must be one of those old witches who live up in the mountains I hear so much about. Or else she wouldn’t read my mind so well,”<sup>19</sup> and the witch repeats this. By

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<sup>17</sup> Ohba, “The Smile of a Mountain Witch,” 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.



emphasizing this particular passage that she repeats, I stress that reading her dependency on the man's words does not always work because she controls what he thinks of her. In other words, she gaslights him.

What the relay of the words between the yamamba and the man achieves is a dislocation of words in the story. The words that seem to have been engulfed in the border of the traveler's mind transfers to the witch's mind and comes out from her mouth. The witch scares the traveler not because she eats his flesh (because she does not), but because her mind-reading ability nibbles at the edge of his self and pulverizes his identity, and thus, she entices him into the world of amorphous self only to produce his opposite reactions.

The witch's activity of repetition changes the passive trait of repeating into an active one in that she makes what is unheard heard; or, she empowers words. Silence is almost impossible if she is able to hear what others think. She lives in the world of fluid confines, which may have come from the yamamba's trait as "a being 'with birthplace unknown [and] lodgings uncertain,'" recalling how Noriko Reider speaks of the yōkai's biographical impossibility, and which is a reflection of the topography of the mountain resistant to being enclosed. Ohba touches upon the disguises that the witch has to use according to her environment: "For one reason or another, however, we never hear about young witches living up in the mountains. It seems that the young ones cannot bear to remain in their hermitage, and their stories become transformed into stories of cranes, foxes, snowy herons, or other beasts or birds. They then become beautiful wives and live in human settlements."<sup>20</sup> Here, Ohba implies that this story of a mountain witch

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 195.

subsumes many other characters that appear in Japanese folklores in order to encourage her readers to revise their thoughts and ideas about each tale that has been a part of the Japanese literary tradition. This description of the metamorphosing yamamba also leads to Michiko Wilson's depiction of the yamamba who embodies "ambiguity and chaos." The mountain witch, as her universe is also fluid if she could go into others' minds and hear their voices as if they were hers, needs to and is able to go through multiple metamorphoses to start afresh.

In a dialogue with Ohba, Mizuta Noriko suggests that women rather than men are able to see the problems of the society more clearly because they are distanced from its center.<sup>21</sup> The yamamba's ability of reading other's mind privileges the marginal place from which she looks at society. Her metamorphoses also reflect her ambiguous identity that can be linked with her being from "birthplace unknown [and] lodgings uncertain." The different forms that the yamamba can assume, however, are not functional in "human settlements" where they need to "become beautiful wives [to] live" and are not beneficial because the multiple identities make her suffer. The mirror, as a typical literary device to show the truth, appears in "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" even though it is in the form of a spring:

. . . she [the woman] would look at her face reflected in a clear spring. Then she would see that half her face was smiling like an affectionate mother, while the other half was seething with demonic rage. Blood would trickle down from her mouth while it devoured and ripped the man's flesh apart. The other half of her lips was caressing the man who curled up his body in the shadow of one of her breasts, sucking it like a baby.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ohba Minako and Mizuta Noriko, *Taidan "Yamamba" no iru fūkei*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Ohba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," 201.

This describes the truth of her identities which, in fact, will never be singular. Thus, we understand that depending on the perspective and the language that we use to observe the figure of yamamba, it can display different and even oppositional characteristics. This means that the reader of “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” should never be satisfied with the decision that the woman can be her true self when she chases some male travelers in the mountain as a scary yamamba because that is only one of her aspects. Her tragedy comes from her obligation to act in accordance with the environment. She can only say out loud what she reads in others’ minds when she is on a lonesome mountain, and even there, if she does that, she will be left alone. The narrator summarizes, “If only she could say out loud like the legendary witches, ‘You just thought – didn’t you?’ how relieved she would feel!”<sup>23</sup> She lives in the world of either/or and not in the world of both. The hardship that she encounters comes from the fact that other people, who live in the settlement, the society, or at the center, and who thus has the clear sense of separation between the self and the other, cannot read her or any others’ minds.

No matter where she is, the woman is not allowed to reveal her two faces reflected on the clear spring. This is precisely the message that the narrator delivers in the penultimate paragraph of the story:

She [The woman] wondered which would be happier, to live in the mountains and become a man-eating witch, or to have the heart of a mountain witch and live in the settlement. But now she knew that either way it would not have made much difference. If she had lived in the mountains, she would have been called a mountain witch. Living in the settlement she could have been thought of as a fox incarnate or an ordinary woman with a sturdy mind and body who lived out her natural life. That was the only difference, and either way it would have been all the same.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 206.

Realizing her obligation to choose (either/or), the yamamba woman also knows that her project to assume two or more identities at a time is doomed to fail.

What the narrator tries to do by delivering her narrative territory to her readers through the beginning sentence, then, coincides with what the yamamba does by reading others' minds in the story; that is, to transcend the boundary between the self and the other by using the power of writing or speaking. It is understandable that Ohba attaches the power of reading and writing to transcend the individual binary to the female protagonist and characters because women, rather than men, are on the margin, and thus, women are able to see social problems from the distance. While Ohba discusses the changing forms that the yamamba can assume depending on the environment, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" is her attempt to follow the trajectory of women's history. When the yamamba, who assumes the human form, develops arteriosclerosis only to be diagnosed "that she was merely going through menopause,"<sup>25</sup> the narrator says, "She felt a slight numbness as though her body belonged to someone else. It was a stiffness related to the vague memory of her mother, long gone, far away."<sup>26</sup> Just when the medical world puts down women in the social hierarchy by the power of the "scientific," and therefore, "true" knowledge, as Michel Foucault has argued in his *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1990),<sup>27</sup> Ohba's narrator does not forget to excavate the history of women's, not just this particular mother's, suffering from this discursive medical violence. The narrator also describes the scene at the woman's deathbed, "Just before she took her last breath, it

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>27</sup> See, especially, "Part Three: Scientia Sexualis" in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: Introduction*, (New York: Vintage, 1990): 51-74.

crossed her mind that her own mother must have been a genuine mountain witch as well.”<sup>28</sup> Writing a story of yamamba, Ohba depicts a genealogy of women, not only of mothers. Even when the yamamba is still a girl, she has the yamamba trait, or the ability of reading others’ minds, and she suffers from it. This story is about yamamba’s ability as a mind-reader, because of which women ironically must prohibit themselves from speaking freely. Moreover, in this aspect, to read Ohba’s story about yamamba as a story about the power of writing is an important project.

Perhaps, the mountain witch’s smile is her best performance of ambiguous traits in the human settlement in which it is difficult to maintain her variegated, and almost heroic, multiple identities because the combination of a “smile” and a “mountain witch” is oxymoronic if we follow the typical image of scary yamamba. This may have been the reason that Ohba chose this phrase as the story’s title. There at her deathbed, the old yamamba refuses to choose either/or: “Strangely enough, when she died she had a mysteriously naïve face with the innocent smile of a newborn baby.”<sup>29</sup> It is strange and mysterious that “the innocent smile of a newborn baby” is on the face of the old yamamba. Moreover, a smile carries equivocal implications, as the original Japanese word, 微笑 (bishō), means “subtle smile.” The subtlety of the woman’s smile and the “in-betweenness” of a newborn baby and an old woman (the coexistence of two identities reflected on the clear spring) are quickly reduced by her daughter’s simple interpretation: “Such a beautiful death mask – Mother, you really must have been a happy woman.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ōba, “The Smile of a Mountain Witch,” 206.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

The phrase “a beautiful death mask” is Noriko Mizuta Lippit’s translation of 死顔 (“*shinigao*”), which literally means “death face” that is said to reflect the dead person’s life and thoughts and feelings about it. The daughter thinks or is willing to think that her mother was happy because she smiled by disregarding the ambiguous quality of a smile as well as the woman’s different identities. Whether intentionally or incidentally, Lippit’s use of the word “mask” reveals other possible implications behind the woman’s expression. This translator also emphasizes that the daughter forces her interpretation on her face by translating “*Okaasan wa hontō ni shiawase datta none*” into “Mother, you really must have been a happy woman,” instead of a more literal translation, “Mother, you really were a happy woman, weren’t you?” The reader should remember that the daughter’s perspective turns the woman into “Mother.”

The narrator introduces the history of women who have been put into some molds such as “faithful spouses,” “nurses,” “mothers,” and “mountain witches.” These labels have their respective places whose societies would not allow them to transcend the borders without assuming “appropriate” forms. Obviously, these confines are partially self-made ones in that women restrict themselves not to speak out loud what they have read in the others’ minds. The monolithic description of a yamamba as a fearful old woman of course comes from misogyny embodied by the man in “The Smile of a Mountain Witch.” Michiko Wilson links the yamamba’s image as a scary old witch with a Freudian notion of male anxiety about castration by mentioning that Ohba rather humorously suggests that it is not easy for her husband to “keep” a yamamba (Ohba herself) at home. However, we cannot confine the source of this scary old female image of yamamba into misogyny that the man has toward his wife. Ohba situates the fear of the

yamamba's ability as a mind reader in the relationship between the mother and a daughter as well as between the husband and the wife or the man and the woman. I suggest that the fear of the mind reader stems from the fear of hearing one's voice coming from other's mouth because they feel that the border between the self and the other disappears. To empower women's voices is obviously an important and large part of Ohba's project, but that is not all she wants to achieve. Fighting against various social injustices, she tries to transcend the individual boundaries and establish a non-hierarchical community.

The fear that I point out here is similar to the fear that regards cannibalism as a taboo, and this is why that the yamamba, or cannibalistic monster, is all the more appropriate for implanting this fear. Drawing heavily on the Freudian theory of the "oral stage" at which the child is still connected to the mother, Maggie Kilgour speaks about cannibalism as an act that is related to the desire to return to the stage before the establishment of a discrete identity. As opposed to cannibalism in the past, which was used to construct differences between the colonizer and the colonized, more recent cannibalism (as of 1998 when Kilgour wrote her essay) is used to transcend the boundaries of the binary oppositions such as the self and the other, the natural and the cultural, man and woman, and so forth. What Ohba wants the yamamba to achieve – while she knows that it is impossible to achieve – is this return to the stage before the establishment of a discrete identity. Ohba's yamamba does not eat human's flesh, but she eats human's words because she wants to *conceive* the Freudian "symbiotic oneness" (to which Kilgour also refers), in which there is only a fluid boundary between the mother and the child. In fact, Freud uses the term "cannibalistic" to describe this filial

relationship, according to Kilgour.<sup>31</sup> I argue that the fear that drives the male traveler away from the yamamba in Ohba's "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" is the fear toward losing "a discrete identity."

Ohba's project to go beyond ones' "discrete identity" by using the yamamba's ability of mind reading fails because of this fear, and "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" is destined to have a sad ending because Ohba is aware of this fear. In one scene, the narrator introduces that the woman becomes "exceedingly fat" partly because she is a mind-reader: "The main reason for this [her fatness] was that she was the possessor of exceptionally healthy digestive organs and consequently was constantly plagued by enormous appetites. But on top of that, she had the pitiful characteristic of wanting to make others feel good; even if she did not like it, she would eat up whatever was offered to her in order not to disappoint that person."<sup>32</sup> In order "to make others feel good," she needs to use her ability of reading their minds. "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," in this sense, draws a connection between her eating and reading words, and by extension, Ohba revises the story of cannibalism, or the eater and the eaten, into the story of the reader and the read. Her obesity depends on her sensitivity, but ironically, her act of eating that is triggered by her sensitivity changes into a reflection of her weak will through her husband's erroneous interpretation.

It is significant that differences between her and her husband's (and others') understanding of certain words make her want to go to the mountain:

Because his use of words such as strength of will, insensitivity, and laziness so

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<sup>31</sup> Maggie Kilgour, "The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time," in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 238-59.

<sup>32</sup> Ohba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," 200.



differed from hers, she would at times be overwhelmed by a sense of acute loneliness. She would come to fear not only her husband but many of the others around her as well, feeling as though she were surrounded by foreigners who did not speak the same language. Sometimes she thought she would rather live as a hermit in the depths of the mountains.<sup>33</sup>

She speaks like a foreigner, and her foreignness makes her a monstrous figure even in the marginal place as well as in the settlement or the society if she speaks out there. “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” is Ohba’s ambitious project, and her ambitiousness is ironically revealed by the yamamba’s lamentations in the modern society. This may be the reason that Ohba creates the world of her dream or imagination in “Candle Fish” that I discuss in the next chapter. Hurley writes, “To accommodate such angry and powerful women, Ohba maps out new countries and provides them with cultural histories.”<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to argue that Ohba prepares a “new country” for the woman in “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” even in her afterlife because for her at her deathbed “either way [“to live in the mountains . . . or to . . . live in the settlement”] would not have made much difference.” But, at least, Ohba privileges the yamamba’s perspective that comes from the marginal. She may only have one audience, a lost traveler to speak out loud what she reads in his mind, and she practices it only in that marginal territory called the mountains whose topography does not allow clear boundaries. Mapping out “new countries” through the use of yamamba’s imagination in “Candle Fish” is what I discuss next.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

<sup>34</sup> Hurley, 100.

## CHAPTER II YAMAMBA'S CANDLE FISH LANGUAGE IN OHBA'S IMAGINARY LAND OF "CANDLE FISH"

The story of "Candle Fish" was written and published in the Japanese literary magazine *Gunzo* in 1986. Ohba uses a narrator who sometimes imagines that she becomes a yamamba eating travelers lost in the woods. The story begins with the narrator who imagines herself chasing a young man, who takes off his clothes so that he can run away from the yamamba narrator while she eats his clothes. Catching up with the man, who is now dead for an unknown reason, the yamamba devours his corpse, while his blood drips from her mouth and the sound of her munching on his bones reverberates in the woods. The narrator assumes the form of yamamba whenever her friend Tsukiko comes to visit her. Tsukiko is an imaginary character that the narrator seems to create based on her actual friend named Olga, who leaves town after she remarries. Olga had been married previously but divorced her first husband because he was violent towards her and their children. The narrator, who is dissatisfied with her own marriage and is contemplating leaving her own husband and child, visits Olga's house and becomes friendly with her. The narrator admires Olga's courage in leaving her husband and starting her life anew with her two children. Through her conversations with Olga, the narrator learns how Olga first fell in love with her husband, who was a musician, and then left him. According to the narrator, Olga has a high sensitivity to people who are involved with art, and whenever she finds them, she labels them with "seals," or imaginary labels that she always prepares and carries in her mind, which say "scoundrels" (*rokudenashi*). Near the end of the story, the narrator conveys that she no longer has a chance to talk to Olga who has left town after marrying a new husband. Olga

has become Tsukiko who still visits the narrator once in a while in her dream-like imagination and continues to share stories of her life. When the narrator asks Tsukiko, “You are not putting your seals on people anymore?” at the end of the story, she answers, “I’ve lost all my seals.”<sup>35</sup> The story thus ends with the vagueness that she either voluntarily or involuntarily stops labelling people around her.

In this chapter, I will suggest that Ohba has the narrator in “Candle Fish” imagine herself as a yamamba because for Ohba the yamamba represents the creative power to produce the characters of stories in imaginary realms instead of destroying people by eating them. By linking the rootlessness of the yamamba to the language that the protagonist speaks and calls “the candle fish language,” I will talk about how the yamamba’s ability of transcending the border between the self and other in “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” plays out in “Candle Fish” in relation to language, nationality, and race.

In order to discuss the imaginative creativity of the yamamba narrator in “Candle Fish,” it seems significant that the narrator cannot tell Olga that she is an author because she labels all artists “scoundrels”:

I had been intimidated by Olga in the days of our early friendship. Every time I met her [sic] I thought about telling her that I was a writer, but I hesitated. Since I hadn’t published any work yet, I had no reason to tell her; yet keeping this from her made me feel uneasy. I knew I was a writer and nothing else, it was a fate I was powerless against. So, by not telling her, I felt I was lying about myself.<sup>36</sup>

This is a powerful declaration from the narrator because she does not have any doubts that she will become a writer. In order to achieve this “fate,” the narrator becomes a

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<sup>35</sup> Ohba Minako, “Candle Fish,” 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

yamamba in her imagination. The fact that Tsukiko, the imaginary character, has “lost all her seals” at the end indicates that the narrator can now freely declare her status as a writer because she does not need to worry about being labelled as a “scoundrel.” I will explain how she creates the character of Tsukiko in her imagination who works as a gateway for the narrator to be a yamamba, and therefore, to be a writer.

Tsukiko and the narrator speak in the voice of candle fish, or what is called, “the candle fish language.” It is a language that constantly changes because there are no regularities or patterns in its syntax and semantics. The narrator describes it:

I call the language in which Tsukiko and I talk candle fish language because when we talk [sic] neither the names we were given at our birth, nor our nationalities, nor the language we grew up speaking matters. We talk in a language that can only be understood between those who have lost the names given them at birth, the nationalities they were born to, and the language they have been raised to speak. Candle fish can swim to any shore of any country.<sup>37</sup>

Candle fish language is the language that does not belong to any specific region. The narrator talks about the days that she spent “at the northernmost corner of the earth.”<sup>38</sup> She describes the peaks behind Olga’s house, which were called the Three Sisters: “Those days that I spent looking at the Three Sisters were the most important period of my life because I focused on finding what is in the depth of words. I had no other means to communicate with them [those who live there] except for speaking by disregarding all the regulations of the language, which had been determined by the race”<sup>39</sup> (my translation).

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ohba’s original sentences in Japanese says, 「〈三人姉妹〉を眺めて暮した年月は、わたしが言葉の奥にあるものを手探りにすることに集中した、人生の最も重要な時期だった。わたしはそ

In her translation of the story, Yukiko Tanaka renders the language that the narrator uses here into her “broken English” because the narrator, or Ohba, is considered Japanese living in the United States. I contend, however, that in this passage the narrator tries to describe her attempts to communicate in the candle fish language which does not conform to any regulations determined by a specific “race” because it can only be spoken when one disregards one’s given name, nationality, and native language. Thus, I have decided to retranslate this passage into standard English so that the reader can have easy access to the narrator’s thoughts. Moreover, it is impossible to decide which language and race she speaks about in this passage just from the context. Throughout the story, Ohba writes about the importance of “what is in the depth of words,” which she can only look for when she speaks in the candle fish language, or the “rootless” language of the vagabonds or immigrants from the periphery of the earth in order to communicate with Tsukiko.

Ohba carefully constructs the character of Olga so as not to place her in any specific cultural background. The narrator compares Tsukiko’s original name "Olga" with one of the characters’ names from Anton Chekhov's play *Three Sisters* (the name of the peaks behind Olga’s house is also from his play). However, she does not clearly introduce the name as a Russian name; instead, she says that the name is a Russian-like (ロシア風) name.<sup>40</sup> Olga is introduced as being born and raised in the United States, but the language that the narrator uses to communicate with Olga is neither Russian nor

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の民族のとりきめである言語の法則を全く無視したところで語る以外に、彼らと語り合う術はなかった。」 in *Ohba Minako Zenshū Vol.9* 大庭みな子全集 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), 312.

<sup>40</sup> Yukiko Tanaka simply translates this into a Russian name in her translation of “Candle Fish,” in *Unmapped Territories*, 21.

English. While the story is set in a mysterious place “at the northernmost corner of the earth,” the narrator also has moved there from Japan and moved back to Japan again. Thus, through moving, she seems to have developed her ability to speak candle fish language.

Ohba explains the similarity between candle fish (they are so called because they burn like candles) and Tsukiko (or the daughter of the moon) by the use of color: “Like Tsukiko, they [candle fish] shine and change colors in the moonlight.”<sup>41</sup> And, the narrator describes the colors of the moon or Tsukiko: “Sometimes her robe is pale red, or the blurring color of milk; other times it is the sharp color of lemon.”<sup>42</sup> Tsukiko and the candle fish both constantly change their colors; or, put another way, they do not have an original color. Besides, or because of, the changing colors, the narrator describes Tsukiko’s changing shapes as well as the moon’s shapes near the end of the story: “She was no longer Olga but Tsukiko with her shiny skin reflecting the moonlight. The moon does not give light of its own; it simply reflects other light to become either young or old, a full moon or a thin new moon. Sometimes it disappears completely, making the night pitch dark.”<sup>43</sup>

Analyzed from a feminist perspective, this description of the moon gestures to the meekness of Japanese women, just like the “pale face of the moon” – the phrase that Hiratsuka Raichō uses in contrast to the goddess Amaterasu Ohmikami a “Woman [who]

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 37.

was truly the Sun” in her manifesto for the inaugural edition of *Seitō* in 1911.<sup>44</sup> Raichō’s lamentation that “Now, Woman is the Moon. Living off another, reflecting another’s brilliance, she is the moon whose face is sickly and wan” is similar to what Ohba’s narrator says about the moon or Tsukiko. However, considering the parallelism between the candle fish language that constantly changes without any regulations and the moon/Tsukiko’s changing colors, the reader needs to be aware of the significance of the moon’s “rootless” and amorphous aspect. The moon that does not have its original color can be linked to Yuri’s literary philosophy in *The Three Crabs* that people can sing beautifully if they can live like immigrants who do not have strong senses of rootedness in their homelands. By extension, the moon is also indirectly associated with the yamamba who moves from one mountain to another because when she speaks in the candle fish language in order to communicate with Tsukiko, the narrator assumes the yamamba’s form.

Olga’s background becomes more specific only if we place “Candle Fish” in a larger context. “Candle Fish,” which was originally published in 1986, later became the second chapter in *Umi ni yuragu ito* in 1989, for which Ohba earned the Kawabata Yasunari literary award. The chapter “Candle Fish” is especially strange in the context of the entire novel because, unlike the other chapters, this one is more fantastic, and there is the slippage between the real and the supernatural. The narrator speaks about herself as yamamba only in this chapter. In its first chapter titled “Sermon-berry Bay,” Olga’s mother, Nina, is introduced as living in Saint Michael in Alaska where Ohba had lived

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<sup>44</sup> I have encountered this phrase of Hiratsuka Raichō in one of the footnotes that Anne Sokolsky uses to translate Tamura Toshiko’s “Karihorunia monogatari” カリフォルニア物語 [California Story], in her *From New Woman Writer to Socialist: The Life and Selected Writings of Tamura Toshiko from 1936-1938* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 219.

with her husband for eleven years. However, while Ohba keeps using the same characters' names in subsequent chapters, she deliberately makes it ambiguous whether the second chapter and the other chapters are continuous. The narrator again introduces Olga in "Candle Fish" that immediately follows "Sermon-berry Bay" as if she appears for the first time in *Umi ni yuragu ito*. There is a reason for this disruption: *Umi ni yuragu ito* consists of seven short pieces that were published independently in a literary magazine *Gunzō* from 1986 to 1989. Ohba's characters are mostly based on those from her personal memories when she lived in Saint Michael. "Candle Fish" stands out prominently in *Umi ni yuragu ito* because Ohba makes deliberate efforts to create a space that is not reduced to one country by using the candle fish language as well as by refraining from using proper nouns for places as much as possible. To return to Adrienne Hurley, "Ohba does not attempt to create a transparent relationship between the 'individual' and the 'nation' that would leave the customary gaps and fissures unproblematized; nor does she rely on a monolithic or static view of the 'nation.' . . . [her fiction] also opens up new possibilities for understanding the politics of transnational identities in our contemporary world."<sup>45</sup> Placed in the context of *Umi ni yuragu ito*, the chapter of "Candle Fish" enhances its importance because it does not specify its setting while other chapters do by referring to Saint Michael, Alaska, Tokyo, and Kyoto.

The autobiographical aspects of *Umi ni yuragu ito* make the reader think that the narrator is Ohba herself. She gains her transnational identity because she moves between two countries. I think that Ohba's movement between Japan and the U.S. reveals that she sees herself as rootless. Because of this rootlessness, she reintroduces the reader to the

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<sup>45</sup> Hurley, 90.



same characters in a separate section so that they, too, experience the same sense of greeting and bidding farewell that is part of the frequent traveler's life. This strategy is an interesting literary experiment of Ohba because the narrative structure mirrors the life of vagabonds or immigrants; each character seems to start afresh in a new chapter (or, new country or region), but they almost inevitably carry their homeland's (the previous chapters') history and culture. The reader does not know for sure how they should read these characters.

Pointing out Ohba's interest in rootless or transnational characters, Hurley looks at Ohba's novel *Garakuta Hakubutsukan (The Museum of Bits and Pieces, 1975)* and notes, "[a]lthough everyone in the novel wants to believe that nationality is meaningless, they cannot escape its grip even in small-town rural Alaska. The immigrant in *Garakuta* is caught in the interstices—somewhere between where she came from and where she is."<sup>46</sup> Thus abandoning one's own nationality totally is impossible, but it is also impossible to gain a new one. In this expatriate community, it seems that everyone must have some kind of a national identity, regardless if they want it or not. In "Candle Fish" the narrator must create a fictional friend Tsukiko after her friend Olga leaves and she must become a yamamba in order to find an imaginary realm where one's nationality does not matter. In Ohba's mind, then, yamamba becomes a literary device to enable her characters to abandon their nationalities that seem superficial.

Compared to the yamamba in "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," the yamamba in the beginning of "Candle Fish" is much more ferocious. Ohba has a scene in which the narrator chases after a young man and devours him. It is difficult to tell whether the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 95.

narrator depicts the world of her fantasy or of her dream, but the world in which Tsukiko appears can be the one that comes from the narrator's imagination if we remember that the narrator calls herself a writer. In addition, speaking about what language is used in the world of her dream, the narrator confesses, "Now [after a while since I came back to Japan] I don't hear English in my dreams, but when I hear people talk, I'm not sure if it's Japanese, either. To me it sounds more like the language of candle fish. And I'd rather call her Tsukiko than Olga."<sup>47</sup> The Japanese word that Tanaka simply translates into "people" is "*tōjōjinbutsu*" (登場人物), which literally means "people who appear," and which is usually used to refer to characters in creative works such as novels and short stories. The transition from "Olga" to "Tsukiko," then, indicates that the narrator dives into the world of her creative power. When the narrator, or the author, produces her works, she is transformed into a yamamba speaking in the candle fish language. In this sense, "Candle Fish" depicts the yamamba as a figure who has the power of language, not just a scary old witch who devours young men. It is almost as if Ohba says that becoming a writer requires the ability of maintaining the rootless status as an immigrant in a space where "neither the names we were given at our birth, nor our nationalities, nor the language we grew up speaking matters." In other words, the yamamba's ability of writing transcends the individual boundaries.

The reader must acknowledge that Ohba's project is undoubtedly a feminist project by considering that she uses women who are victimized by the patriarchal society, and "Candle Fish" is no exception. The story's narrator explains that the yamamba's urge to eat the lost male travelers is triggered by their expectations to receive a "blessing"

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

("megumi") from her just by visiting her: becoming a yamamba in her imagination, the narrator states,

I felt like abandoning everything in my life, and I was in a state of anxiety that could only be calmed by running wild in the mountain and devouring everything in my sight. Why would I run after them? Those travelers who knocked at the door of my solitary abode in the mountain did not necessarily care about me. They never told me what they really thought, plaguing my life with their politeness. Yet they expected blessing from the yamamba. These people reminded me of the hypocrites I'd seen in my younger days down in the village, and they made me angry.<sup>48</sup>

Although the narrator does not name the "blessing" here, one reading suggests that it can be food and shelter that lost travelers would seek in the mountain, and it may be associated with what mothers typically provide to their family members. This is, therefore, followed by the narrator's description of her husband and child who sleep soundly next to her while she cannot sleep and her desire to disappear from their lives. Her husband and child, then, might have an expectation of receiving the "blessing" from the wife / mother. Although the narrator does not say that she wants to eat them like the yamamba eats the visitors who expect to be "blessed," the yamamba's irritation that triggers her urge to eat the travelers can be compared to the wife/mother's irritation caused by the image of her husband and children who expect to be "blessed" by her unconditionally. This dynamic is partly the reason that Ohba scholars are tempted to read her yamamba in the feminist perspective. However, this perspective that links the yamamba to the narrator as an unhappy woman in her household does not suffice if the reader focuses on how Olga/Tsukiko reads the yamamba in the following scene. Olga's view as a foreigner is one of the elements used to revise the Japanese cannibalistic figure

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<sup>48</sup> Minako Ōba, "Candle Fish," in *Unmapped Territories*, 22.

of yamamba because from the perspective of Olga, who ran away from her husband, the yamamba can be a male figure. The narrator says,

I once told her [Olga] about the yamanbas who chase men through the mountains and devour their bodies after catching them. I pretended I was simply telling her an old Japanese legend. "I'll never lose my way the second time. I won't knock on the door of a hut where a yamamba lives and be eaten alive," she said. Since I had told her it was "a person" rather than "a man" who ran from the yamamba, she imagined herself fleeing from the yamamba.<sup>49</sup>

Through her use of a foreigner's reaction to the Japanese folktale figure, Ohba makes an attempt to break the dichotomy between woman and man by making the cannibalistic yamamba into a male monster. While revising the stereotypical image of yamamba, Ohba also revises its monstrosity by locating the cannibalistic trait of yamamba in the man. It is true that this scene still describes Ohba's feminist criticism, but focusing on the distant perspective that can cause some disruptions in the conventional ways of looking at what is familiar to the natives (the Japanese in this case), Ohba tries to disrupt more fundamental boundaries between the self and other.

Through the use of the candle fish language, Ohba expands the rootlessness of the female monster into her creative power that comes from the vagabonds' or immigrants' perspectives that refuse to be reduced to that of a nation, race, or individual. As the reader cannot determine if the story of "Candle Fish" is an individual story or one of the chapters that would fit in the novel, the creative power of the yamamba, the writer, or Ohba comes from the amorphous self that constantly changes and from the unsettling status that constantly moves.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 35.

**CHAPTER III**  
**YAMAMBA'S WORLD OF *KOTOBA* IN IMMIGRANTS' COMMUNITIES IN**  
***KIRI NO TABI***

*Kiri no tabi* (*The Journey Through the Mist*) is a serialized work that Ohba Minako published in the literary magazine *Gunzō* from 1976 to 1977 and from 1979 to 1980. The novel is autobiographical in that the first-person narrative of Yurie develops from Ohba's observations about her relatives when she was still a girl to her depictions of how she became a writer in her adult age. Speaking about her childhood, Yurie puts her maternal cousin named Fū at the center of the first half of the novel which begins in a house called "the mountain house" located Kanbara county in Niigata. The owner of the house, Fū is a notorious woman because there is a rumor that she had a child with Sugano Shigeru, who is a younger brother of her husband Seiichirō. In the second half of the novel, there is a chapter titled "Yamamba," in which Yurie compares Fū to a yamamba because she is powerful enough to control these male characters and to own an antiques dealership after her husband's business as a wholesale dealer of medical products goes bankrupt. Yurie carefully observes the human relationship which hinges on the seducer Fū because she herself is attracted to Shigeru. Just like Ohba who studied English literature at Tsuda University, Yurie goes to a women's university in Tokyo and experiences love affairs with a few men when she lives in the dormitory. She also becomes pregnant and chooses to have an abortion. Not long after Yurie goes back home in Niigata, she decides to move to Hokkaido to take a job as an assistant for a botanical garden's director, and after a while, marries Mama Shōzō, who is a high school friend of Shigeru.

The novel's second half is set in the countryside in Sweden, to which Yurie accompanies Shōzō. He goes there as a forest researcher. Moving into a house in the woods near Shōzō's laboratory from an apartment in the town, Yurie becomes friendly with his colleague Monica and her husband Peter who teaches English in a high school and studies Scandinavian literature at a university. Interested in drawing and painting, Yurie attends a college art class and produces some paintings while Shōzō works. She finds similarities between herself and Peter who wants to be a writer and who actually writes some avant-garde plays. Eventually, she has a love affair with Peter and becomes pregnant. Yurie once again crosses an ocean because of Shōzō's job, not to go back to Japan but to the United States. Not knowing if the father is Shōzō or Peter, Yurie delivers a baby after moving to Seattle. The novel ends in a house in the woods near Seattle where she lives with Shōzō and their daughter Chie.

That is the plot of *Kiri no tabi*. Yurie narrates her own story while she makes comparisons between women and men. In order to make the comparisons, she places both herself and Fū in relation to the story's male characters as well as men in general. In terms of sexual relationships, Ohba clearly draws a parallel between Fū and Yurie because both of them do not know for certain who are their children's fathers. I will show that Yurie also becomes a yamamba through her similarities with Fū in this chapter to argue that Ohba describes a yamamba as a vagabond in the modern international community who can maintain a fluid confine of her amorphous self while merging into nature through gaining her command of a primitive language that Ohba calls *kotoba*. The yamamba's ability to transcend the border between different individuals in "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" and the one to transcend the differences of nations, races, and genders

now become her ability to transcend the border between the human self and nature. The “Yamamba” chapter is situated near the end of the entire novel after the reader has read what happened to Yurie’s life in Sweden. In the novel’s second half about her life with Shōzō and Peter in the foreign land, Ohba deliberately inserts this short chapter about the mountain house and Fū in Kanbara as if she wants to highlight Fū and Yurie’s similarities.

In the “Yamamba” chapter, Yurie hears from Shigeru that Seiichirō has died of cancer. This does not mean that Yurie returns to Japan. Shigeru comes to Scotland on a business trip and asks if Shōzō is interested in his business with an American dealer in lumber. When Yurie depicts Fū in the mountain house in the “Yamamba” chapter, she either remembers or imagines her. In order to see how the amorphous self of yamamba is used in *Kiri no tabi*, it is important to notice that Yurie uses a few similar monsters to depict Fū. Hearing Shigeru speak about Seiichirō’s funeral, she says that in her imagination,

Fū looks like a smiling yamamba with her bristling hair. And, in the next moment, she looks like an *oni* crone with her mouth slitting to her ears. Then, she becomes a beautiful witch who spins threads sitting with one of her knees close to her chest in a hut in the blowing wind. The meticulous and sweet melody of her spinning crosses the mountain field and makes the traveler stop walking.<sup>50</sup>

Ohba does not seem to distinguish between a yamamba, an *oni* crone, and a witch in this quote because Fū can become like all of them at least in Yurie’s imagination, but one can also say that Ohba describes the metamorphoses that start from yamamba. In other words, Fū is a yamamba who can assume different forms. As I have shown in the previous

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<sup>50</sup> Ohba Minako, *Kiri no tabi 霧の旅* [The Journey Through the Mist] in *Ohba Minako Zenshū Vol.6 大庭みな子全集 第六卷*, (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1991), 397. All translations from this novel are mine hereafter.

chapter about “Candle Fish,” this chapter discusses the link between the traits of yamamba’s self that Yurie inherits from Fū and a primitive language called *kotoba* that Ohba gained and developed in an international community of immigrants in Alaska. This *kotoba* is equivalent to the candle fish language that the narrator in the form of yamamba uses to communicate with Tsukiko in “Candle Fish,” but the world of *kotoba* in *Kiri no tabi* is different from the fantastic and imaginary world of the short story because Ohba finds, instead of creates, the land on which the yamamba can live in the realistic world of immigrants.

Similar to the multiple forms of yamamba, Fū’s omnipresence comes up when Yurie and Shigeru speak about her: Yurie says,

A woman like Fū, who is selfish, should become a yamamba and live alone in the mountain. Shigeru, you are not the kind of man who loses his way and wander into yamamba’s hut, but rather the kind of man who would eagerly seek out her hut by cutting through the grass field. You can’t blame anybody except for yourself, but I can imagine that being chased by a yamamba, you will run away by crossing over the mountains and rivers while she eats the peaches and apricots that you threw at her. Even if you escape into a house with a light that you find in the valley, though, it can be another yamamba’s habitat.<sup>51</sup>

To this, Shigeru laughs and answers, “That’s right. That should be true. Yamamba can be anywhere.”<sup>52</sup> After this, Shigeru makes a prediction that Yurie also will be a yamamba.

The reader, then, should think about the possibility to understand the omnipresence of yamamba as the multiplicities of yamamba which seem to be inherited through women’s genealogy at which Ohba hints in “The Smile of the Mountain Witch.”

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 403.



In this entire novel, there is only one time when Yurie compares herself to yamamba: “I became a yamamba who scrapes rice into her mouth while covering her fully-bulging belly with her arm.”<sup>53</sup> Apparently, the fact that she imagines herself as a yamamba is related to the act of devouring food. Yurie’s comparison between herself and yamamba happens when she speaks with Shōzō about an old woman whom she met in the Swedish woods. When Yurie was looking for some mushrooms, the old woman was also looking for them. Becoming friends with each other instantly, she invited Yurie to her house several times and cooked her various foods such as mushrooms and chestnuts. As opposed to Yurie, who is excited to cook these foods by herself and try them, Shōzō finds it dangerous to try mysterious mushrooms that may be poisonous. What he says to her is suggestive: “Just like that, you must have tried various men.”<sup>54</sup> He also compares her to a dog that succumbs to a disease which makes one unable to stop eating. Through the act of devouring, Yurie makes the link between herself and the yamamba. Additionally, Shōzō’s association of her eating desire and sexual desire brings her closer to Fū, who attracts different men to herself sexually. Besides the fact that both women sleep with different men, however, it is more important to notice, for my argument, that Yurie describes herself as similar to Fū, who assumes different forms and is compared to omnipresent yamamba, as if she has a kind of fluid confine of her self in the Swedish woods.

Hinting at the relationship between the language that she uses and the self that she assumes, Yurie uses other comparisons in the same section in which she compares herself

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 212.

to the devouring yamamba: “Thinking that I was not a human anymore, I was terribly happy feeling as if I could speak cats’ language. . . . I received a pleasure because all theories collapsed and left from the inside of my self which starts drifting in the ocean as if it were a jellyfish with its bones taken out.”<sup>55</sup> In her imagination, Yurie changes her forms constantly to the extent that she feels herself becoming like an amorphous entity. This fluid confine of her self also gives her a pleasure and comfort that come from a kind of homelessness while she lives in the Swedish woods:

Ever since I came to this foreign country, I had never become homesick. I did not think that there had been a home to return in the past I knew. That was a cage whose door would open and close with a squeaking and unpleasant sound. . . . Shōzō was a person who belonged to a world that I had not known before, and at the same time, I was surrounded by foreigners. Nonetheless, those strangers gave me comfort rather than fear. That’s because they did not define me by saying that I was supposed to be this and that. They did not care no matter how I moved because my existence would cause them no harm. Then, I started to feel the self that I had continued to nourish solidly flowed out like an oil all of a sudden and started to disperse into the world, and I felt the pleasure that I could melt naturally into the space in which those surrounding me had been wandering and spreading their lives widely.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than lamenting about the absence of her home, Yurie welcomes it because it makes her self melt into the surroundings. The foreign land gives her the pleasure and freedom of leading her life without thinking about other people’s expectations and cultural norms. Whereas the image of yamamba with which Yurie uses to compare herself is first linked with the eating and devouring acts in this section of the novel, her self assumes another image of the boneless jellyfish when she happily feels as if she could speak with cats’ language. Here in this part of the novel written in 1979 and thus

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 214-215.

showing her maturity as an author, Ohba makes the Swedish mountain expand into the larger world of nature through Yurie's, by extension from Fū's, metamorphoses that start with the image of yamamba. Yurie confesses elsewhere that in the foreign country she "looked at people as if she looked at the falling rain and figured them out as if she figured out the directions of wind. The border between the human and nature had disappeared."<sup>57</sup> To remember Mizuta Noriko's topography of the mountains, yamamba is used as a creature who lives in the world without clear borders – the world described as a completely different from the one in which Yurie was constantly expected to be a certain kind of woman by her parents.

Although Yurie graduated from the women's university in Tokyo, her education did not lead her to experiencing the expansions of the world. She had been critical of Japanese institutionalized education since she spent her childhood during the war. Her chauvinistic history teacher kept hailing the emperor and spoke about Japanese mythologies with honorifics. She did not believe either that the higher education of a university would be able to teach what she called "the soul of literature."<sup>58</sup> Institutionalized education, for her, is similar to her parents because it only provides her a mold based on social norms. Returning to her parents' house and leading a reclusive life in her room, she kept excoriating her parents in her mind because from her point of view, her father, who is a doctor, and her mother, who supports her husband in the house, were too conservative to expect anything from their daughter other than a stable marriage. Especially, Yurie's mother is described as a stubborn person who does not like the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 69.

Japanese democracy after WWII because Japan is just imitating America and being vulgar and shallow. After a while, nonetheless, what saves her from her parents' expectations is a marriage, but her marriage brings her into the world of nature.

Shōzō is an important character not only because he is Yurie's husband but also because he is the gateway for Yurie to enter the world of nature and the world without borders. Shōzō introduced Yurie to the director of a botanical garden, who gave her a job as his assistant. Because of this job, she could escape from her family's house after her graduation. Shōzō's existence for Yurie functions as a medium for reaching something different. Before marriage, Yurie used to see him as a way to maintain her relationship with Shigeru to whom she was attracted. After marriage, she meets Peter and his wife Monica who was Shōzō's colleague. And, of course, it is his job as a researcher of the woods that allowed Yurie to start her life in the foreign country in which she does not feel molded into a certain kind of woman. Throughout the novel, Ohba succeeds in describing Shōzō as a character who has an eerie power of presence which seems to come from his nonchalant attitude toward everything. Even when he clearly realizes that Yurie has slept with Peter, he seems to accept it as some kind of fate without becoming angry.

If the concept of traditional family, such as her own, appeared unappealing to and incompatible with Yurie, it is understandable that she and Shōzō are congenial because Shōzō's family is much different from hers. He lives with his grandfather who left his wife and eloped to Hokkaido with a young woman. After Shōzō's father died and his mother married someone else, Shōzō's grandfather took him in because his grandmother also died. His grandfather still lives with the young woman who looks like Shōzō's older sister rather than his grandmother or mother. Shōzō's characteristic as a man of nature in

this novel is linked with his movability not only from Japan to Sweden but also from one place to another while growing up, which suggests his rootlessness or homelessness.

Therefore, Yurie feels comfortable becoming a yamamba who does not belong any home and who metamorphoses into different forms. In addition, Peter's family does not maintain the conventional form either; his father is Austrian, and his mother is Swedish, but she elopes with a French man and left her family. The fact that Yurie mentions herself as a yamamba in the foreign country in which she sleeps with these men implies that she does not long for any sense of belonging.

The expansion of Yurie's world is also reflected in how she thinks of art.

Although she still keeps writing novels after coming to Sweden, she starts to attend an art school near the high school where Peter teaches Swedish because she thinks that she can learn art even though she does not know the Swedish language well. When she is in the library, she looks at the pages of books of paintings instead of reading books and starts to learn how to communicate through looking at and drawing some images. Just as the narrator in "Candle Fish" uses the candle fish language, which does not belong to any specific regions or countries, to communicate with Tsukiko when she is a yamamba, Yurie learns to communicate through images, pictures, and paintings, or the language that transcends borders. It is worth noticing that Yurie describes the similarities among Swedish, English, and German and understands the connections of European languages. She confesses, "Ever since I came to this country that is beyond my understanding, I have become distressed by the doubts that what I have been writing has any significance for the people in this country and that my works can be called literature if they do not have

any meanings for certain kinds of people.”<sup>59</sup> Because of these doubts that Yurie casts over her written works, Yurie expands her literary world through the revelation that visual arts relished by sense of sight and music relished by sense of hearing consist of something that they share with literature. Shōzō’s world is so mysterious for Yurie that she cannot predict anything that will happen in the future life with him. Living in the language that she cannot understand, Yurie, as a yamamba, feels comfortable with the life that is not controlled by strict syntactic rules and semantic regulations. Interestingly enough, it is the life prohibited by her parents who did not allow her to attend an art school in Japan.

What makes *Kiri no tabi* different from “Candle Fish” and “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” is Yurie’s conscious effort to convey the world of the borderless to the next generation. The relationships between the mothers and children often receive a negative light in Ohba’s works as they have conflicts that stem from different generational norms, especially if they are between the mothers and the daughters. In *Kiri no tabi*, however, Yurie tries to convey the importance of disregarding national boundaries to her daughter Chie. Giving birth to her daughter after moving to the States from Sweden and raising her in Seattle, one day Yurie reads Chie Mother Goose stories. To Chie who tells her that her English sounds strange, Yurie answers, “That’s because I am not an American.” Chie, then, asks if she is an American, and Yurie says. “You are an earth-person (*chikyū-jin*). You need to learn the earth-language (*chikyū no kotoba*) because you are an earth-person.”<sup>60</sup> It is obvious that Yurie wants her daughter to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 408.

disregard the boundary of countries and to live in the space that does not belong to any specific nation. Her experience of living in the Swedish mountains without any confinements that her parents would impose upon her in Japan gives her the philosophy of living in the borderless world. In “The Smile of a Mountain” the yamamba’s ability of reading others’ minds needs to be suppressed because it scares people away even though it is described as a women’s talent, or women’s superiority to men, because the story expresses the yamamba’s lamentations that are caused by the suppressions on her amorphous self. In *Kiri no tabi*, instead of using yamamba as a mind-reader, Ohba focuses more on the yamamba’s ability of uniting herself with nature through describing Yurie’s life in the foreign country. Never revealing the father of Chie and the father of Fū’s daughter Mizuki, Ohba writes about women’s superiority to men who always have to doubt that their children are really theirs because they cannot deliver them. At the same time, however, the mystery of the father seems to express Ohba’s liberal opinion that the family tie based on blood relation should not matter that much. Yamamba is placed outside of family and lives deep in the mountain which is not a part of the settlement constructed. Ohba uses the *topos* of yamamba in order to make the transition from the scary witch to the monster who, on the marginal space, carries the amorphousness to have various identities without settling down one specific place.

Unlike the fantastic chapter of “Candle Fish” in the context of *Umi ni yuragu ito*, *Kiri no tabi* does not have many elements of fantasy. Both of the novels are based on Ohba’s life in foreign countries. The emphasis that Ohba places on the realistic level in *Kiri no tabi* does not allow the novel to include many references to yamamba except for the “Yamamba” chapter that compares Fū to the monster directly. Olga can be Tsukiko

and the narrator can be a yamamba in “Candle Fish” only in the psychological and imaginary realm. Ohba tries to bring the fusion between Yurie and nature to the more realistic level by situating Yurie in Sweden and Seattle. Yurie does not hesitate to mention the names of real places, whereas most of the proper nouns of places in Alaska have disappeared in “Candle Fish.” Yurie’s individual freedom which allows her to disregard social norms and expectations is only achievable in foreign countries or the places of strangers and that freedom for her is, to the great extent, indebted to the personality of Shōzō, the man who protects the woods. Still, *Kiri no tabi* is relatively optimistic, compared to “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” whose protagonist yamamba has to play a certain role that the society imposes upon her. In other words, the novel depicts the expansion of Yurie’s self in an actual setting rather than in the fantastic space of the narrator’s dream-like imagination in “Candle Fish,” and for this reason, I propose that the reader of *Kiri no tabi* is responsible for thinking about what Ohba wants to achieve by making Yurie’s self merge into nature in the Swedish mountains.

Speaking about her experiences of living in Alaska in a round-table discussion for a literary journal *Ushio*, Ohba defines “a life in a foreign country”: “We need to speak in what lies in the depth of language because our language [Japanese] is not connected to the country’s native language [English]. In that sense, that [my life in Alaska] was a good training for a person who did literature.”<sup>61</sup> Throughout this discussion, she speaks rather

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<sup>61</sup> Ohba Minako, Kawai Hayao, Sugimoto Shūtarō, and Yamaori Tetsuo, “Gaikoku taiken to bungaku: *Umi ni yuragu ito ya Garakuta hakubutsukan* no moderu-tachi to Rossia bungaku wo katariatta Alaska no kurashi de shitta koto” 外国体験と文学『海にゆらぐ糸』や『がらくた博物館』のモデルたちと、ロシア文学を語り合ったアラスカの暮らしで知ったこと [Experiencing a Foreign Country and Literature: What I learned during my life in Alaska with the models of the characters in *Umi ni yuragu ito* and *Garakuta hakubutsukan*], in *Ushio* 潮 416 (1993): 299.



passionately about the difference between *kotoba* and *genko*, both of which are usually translated into language. By *kotoba*, however, she means “what lies in the depth of language” which is yet to become *genko*, or language. *Gengo*/language for Ohba is the particular language such as Japanese, English, or Swedish. *Kotoba*, which is prior to *genko*, is more primitive and therefore universal. Ohba, then, emphasizes that “literature is the *kotoba* that lies in the depth of *genko*/language, which I mentioned a little while ago.”<sup>62</sup> Strangely enough, when she was in Alaska, she could communicate with the foreigners better than she could communicate with Japanese people by using the *kotoba*. She confesses that “she did not mind living in the country as long as she could speak the *kotoba* that well.”<sup>63</sup> At the end of *Kiri no tabi*, Yurie has a dream in which she speaks the *kotoba*: “In the dream that contains admixtures of Japan, Sweden, Scotland, and Denmark, the language (*kotoba* in the original) consists of the mixtures of various languages as well as Japanese, and to my surprise, I am speaking these foreign languages quite fluently in the dream.”<sup>64</sup> Even when her daughter tries to wake her up, accusing her of sleeping all the time, she says, “I can’t open my eyes. I can’t see anything. I’ll wake up when the mist clears away.”<sup>65</sup> She feels relaxed in the mist that consists of various languages. Her journey through the mist (or *kiri no tabi*) is a journey through the *kotoba* that has the traits of various languages, which, therefore perhaps, Ohba believes can be linked with a kind of ur-language.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 293

<sup>64</sup> Ohba, *Kiri no tabi* 421.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 424.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that Yurie has been through living in an international community to reach the importance of the earth-language, or *chikyū no kotoba*. Unlike English or *ee-go* (which literally means English-language) that Yurie and Chie discuss, it is also important to notice that Yurie uses “*chikyū no kotoba*” to call the earth-language instead of “*chikyū-go*.” This represents her small effort to avoid juxtaposing the earth-language with other specific languages such as English (*ee-go*), Chinese (*chūgoku-go*), French (*furansu-go*), Swedish (*suweeden-go*), and Japanese (*nihon-go*). I want to add here that the use of *kotoba* does not bring Ohba closer to the *kokugaku* scholars who, according to Yeounsuk Lee, idealized “*yamato kotoba*, the ancient language of Yamato free from *karagokoro*, ‘the Chinese mind,’ and [that] was confined to ancient writings such as the *Kojiki*.”<sup>66</sup> The *kokugaku* scholars are the ones who tried to reveal during the Edo Period (1603-1867) the Japanese indigenous cultures and thoughts, or “spiritual world” (*seishin sekai*), before the influences from Confucianism and Buddhism. Lee explains that *yamato kotoba* is different from *kokugo* (national language) which “became the important basis of every assimilation policy in Japan’s colonies through World War II,”<sup>67</sup> and which has been the Japanese school subject since the incipient movement of building the Japanese nationalism during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). Speaking about the *kotoba* in relation to her life in the immigrants’ community, Ohba does not place an importance on the difference between *kotoba* (originally *yamato kotoba*) and *genko* (originally Chinese word). I am not saying that Ohba wants to bring her language closer

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<sup>66</sup> Yeounsuk Lee, *The Ideology of Kokugo: Nationalizing Language in Modern Japan*, trans. Maki Harano Hubbard (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

to *yamato kotoba* before the influence of Chinese language. When I say that *kotoba* is prior to *genko*/language, that is not a matter of purely temporal order.

I venture to say that the *kotoba* that Ohba describes is closer to Julia Kristeva's "chora" than it is to *yamato kotoba*. Situating the "chora" in the field of the semiotic which precedes the symbolic, Kristeva explains, "The chora is a modality of signifiante [sic] in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic."<sup>68</sup> There seems to be, however, a difference between Ohba's *kotoba* or Yurie's "*chikyū no kotoba*" and Kristeva's "chora," or more precisely speaking, how "chora" is represented in her scholarship. Because the Lacanian symbolic is associated with the phallic and masculine realm of the Father, the semiotic chora which, according to Kristeva, "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality," is often considered the feminine. However, I am not trying to apply this binary reading of the chora to Ohba's *kotoba* simply because the realm of *kotoba* is associated with the woods in which the female supernatural monster *yamamba* lives. In order to expand the gendered reading of the Ohba's world of *kotoba* into discussing the views of *yamamba* as those of the vagabonds and immigrants', the importance of Shōzō comes up once again in my reading of *Kiri no tabi*.

If the woods in the Swedish mountains or near Seattle where Yurie lived with Shōzō are compared to the primitive spaces in which *yamamba* lives, Ohba thinks that the language spoken by *yamamba* who does not belong to any particular place is the *kotoba*, which still carries the primitiveness before it becomes a language. Shōzō does not speak a lot in the novel, but if he is the gateway for Yurie to enter the woods or the world

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<sup>68</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Walter (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 26.

of nature, he is also a gateway for her to the world of *kotoba*. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Yurie keeps speaking about the dichotomies between women and men, sometimes lamenting men's insensibility with women's needs, sometimes boasting women's superiority to men, sometimes confessing that women and men can never understand each other. It is therefore all the more important to notice that the marginal space of woods, which is associated with yamamba, with the evaporation of the self into nature, and with Ohba's *kotoba*, is protected by the male character Shōzō. This male character, I argue, is in this novel because Ohba wants the reader to avoid the simple and gendered binary interpretations of Ohba's literary world, which is nonetheless full of references to gendered dichotomies. Yamamba's world is usually considered a marginalized space and is not just a marginal one because they live there as a result of being expelled from the society by the central and masculine power. Yet, for the first time in Ohba's works, the yamamba's world in *Kiri no tabi* is constructed by the male at least at the beginning. Instead of reading her works as her attempts to empower women's voices, which is obviously a large portion of her purposes of writing, I have thus emphasized that we read them focusing on the voices of immigrants or vagabonds, who always negotiate with foreign cultures and languages in order to establish their identities in the marginal, and not marginalized as I have stated in my introduction, space by *choosing* to go and stay there. Ohba describes Shōzō as a character who seems to belong to the vast world of nature, and not one particular family. This is the link between the yamamba's world and the vagabonds' world, which is located in the space in between. It is interesting to consider the kanji of Shōzō's family name 真間 in this context because it literally means "true between." He is a person who can feel comfortable wondering in the

woods, crossing the borders of different countries, and speaking in the language that embodies the world of between.

Although Ohba went back to Japan from Alaska in 1970, her characters do not miss their homelands, as her comment in the round-table discussion shows. But at the same time, they do not necessarily try to adapt to the specific culture of each country. Ohba's main characters such as Yurie in *Kiri no tabi* and Yuri in *The Three Crabs* are able to feel comfortable living in the neutral space that does not seem to belong to any country. Apparently, they seek a life that is out of the range of others' gaze, a gaze that forces them to act according to cultural norms. Ohba sees the possibility of finding yamamba's mountain in the immigrants' societies. In *Kiri no tabi*, Ohba uses the actual country Sweden and the actual city Seattle in order to construct Ohba's Yoknapatawpha,<sup>69</sup> to use the word from William Faulkner's works that Ohba avidly read, of yamamba. She constructs the community by linking the expansion of the self, which is embodied in the yamamba's homelessness, with the primitive *kotoba* that shares traits with various particular languages in the world. It is true that Ohba from her debut novella wrote the stories of her main female characters in the immigrants' societies, but the story of *Kiri no tabi* shows her conscious effort to connect with a thread together the yamamba's habitats and immigrants' societies as spaces in which one can experience the moments of self-expansions without incarcerating oneself into others' expectations.

While Yurie wants to be a writer, she peruses paintings and drawing in art books after she starts attending an art courses in Sweden. As Yurie says, "I started to learn how

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<sup>69</sup> Mizuta Noriko also uses this name of the world which Faulkner constructed in his works by using the traditions of American South to describe Ohba's world in her article. Mizuta, "Sakka, Sakuhin ron: Ohba Minako no monogatari no henbō" 作家・作品論 大庭みな子の物語の変貌 [An Article about an Author and a Work: The Transfigurations of Ohba Minako's Stories], *Gunzō* 62 no. 8 (2007), 274.

to have conversations by looking at pictures and drawing them because I could not speak nor read the language,” she enters the realm of the primitive *kotoba* through art. Ohba uses artistic talent to make another linkage between Yurie and Fū. It is not mere coincidence that Fū starts her business after the WWII by selling antique artifices to the American soldiers. Recovering from the war’s aftermath, Japan still suffered from financial shortage. In this autobiographical novel, Ohba observes through Yurie’s perspective what Japan experienced during the war, such as that the educational institutions turned into factories to produce war supplies and that women were encouraged to produce children in order to win the war. The Sugano family is depicted as one of the rich families that lost their privileged status after Japan lost the war. Seiichirō’s business of selling medicines goes bankrupt in Niigata. It is in such a circumstance that Fū uses her artistic taste to earn money from American soldiers. Yet, this is not to regain the Sugano family’s prosperity in Niigata because Fū and Seiichirō move to Tokyo. Even though there is a rumor that she makes a fair amount of money through her business, she lives with Seiichirō in “a house that looks like a haunted mansion with tattered paper sliding-doors and summer grass grown rampant.”<sup>70</sup> By describing their house similar to the yamamba’s hut in the mountains, Ohba refuses to depict Tokyo as a glamorous place for the couple. Where they live is one of the margins in the novel. Even though Ohba does not let Fū speak from the marginal space after she moves to Tokyo, Fū haunts the novel sometimes in the form of Yurie and her mother’s conversations about her and sometimes in the form of the yamamba’s traits that Yurie inherits from her. As Yurie tries to learn how to communicate with foreigners in Sweden by looking at art books, so Fū

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<sup>70</sup> Ohba, *Kiri no tabi*, 166.

makes her business with American soldiers by selling antiques while speaking in her broken English. It also seems important that the two characters compared to yamamba in *Kiri no tabi* resort to their abilities of appreciating art, which can be linked with the primitive *kotoba* that transcends borders.

In her *Works of Ohba Minako: Alaska, Hiroshima, and Niigata* (2001), Egusa Mitsuko explains what she calls “the writing style of yamamba” by focusing on Ohba’s other work *Urashimaso* (*Urashima Grass*, 1977). Egusa finds a link between yamamba and the main female character Reiko, who tries to attract multiple men and whose hair suddenly turned white. Egusa then says,

The rhetoric that unifies living entities in nature and the human by overlapping them – such that the Urashima grass’s flower blooming from Reiko’s body – gives the reader phantasmagoric visions: the reader hallucinates that Reiko reaches the dimension of the dehumanized, in which she could freely go back and forth between nature and human, from the inside to the outside, or from the outside to the inside as if she were a female ogre (*kijyo*) who flies in the sky above a high mountain with her white hair waving in the wind. I would like to call this [rhetoric] the writing style of yamamba.<sup>71</sup>

The style of writing that Egusa locates between nature and human immediately creates a supernatural space in which the supernatural monster yamamba can live. What Ohba tries to achieve in *Kiri no tabi* is a refusal to place the primitive *kotoba* into the imaginary world by moving Yurie to the mountains in Sweden and near Seattle so that she can still communicate with the humans. Ohba chooses the world of immigrants or foreigners who do not have strong senses of belonging to specific homes in order to practice the supernatural language in an actual setting.

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<sup>71</sup> Egusa Mitsuko, *Ohba Minako no sekai: Arasuka, Hiroshima, Niigata* 大庭みな子の世界: アラスカ・ヒロシマ・新潟 [*The Works of Ohba Minako: Alaska, Hiroshima, and Niigata*], (Tokyo: Shinyōsha, 2001), 182. The translation is mine.

This actual setting of the story is not the only optimistic element in *Kiri no tabi* in contrast to the yamamba's lamentation in "The Smile of the Mountain Witch" and to the dream-like world of "Candle Fish." Even with the ending in which Yurie does not wake up from her dream, *Kiri no tabi* depicts the mother-daughter relationship in a peaceful light. Having Shōzō who takes care of Chie more than she does, Yurie also reads Mother Goose and various Japanese folktales to her. This happy family relationship at the novel's end seems possible because Yurie keeps her yamamba-ness to some extent by speaking in her broken English with those in the immigrants' community. Yurie's use of imperative to Chie, "Learn (覚えなさい) the earth-language because you are an earth-person," indicates that the world in which people can communicate with the *kotoba* has not been achieved and that there is no guarantee that it will come. However, *Kiri no tabi* conveys Ohba's strong sense of responsibility and her belief that we have to and are able to achieve the world of *kotoba* if we educate our children in the right way and if we continue our journey through the mist.



## CONCLUSION CANONIZATION OF OHBA'S WORKS

In her "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous writes as if she anticipates the criticism that she essentializes a feminine voice precisely through her act to empower it:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can even subjugate.<sup>72</sup>

Ohba's yamambas are all "peripheral figures," but what happens *in* the marginal areas in her works is as important as the fact that they are able to have distant observations *from* the area. As a conclusion of my thesis, I will show how Ohba's fluid confines of the amorphous self in tandem with the topography of the mountains were closely linked with the fact that her works were canonized in modern Japanese literature.

In 1996, Ohba suffered cerebral infarction and the left side of her body was paralyzed. Even when she was confined to a wheelchair, she continued to write for ten more years with her husband's help until she died of kidney failure in 2007. Dictating to her husband, Ohba Toshio, who wrote them down, Ohba was writing as if she became a yamamba who could transcend the individual boundaries between herself and her husband. Besides the Akutagawa Award that she received by writing *The Three Crabs*, she continued to receive other prestigious literary awards such as the Tanizaki Jun'ichirō Award, Kawabata Yasunari Literary Award, Murasaki Shikibu Literary Award, among others. Serving on many prize committees, she played a role in forming Japanese literary

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<sup>72</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 885.

canon while her works were canonized as well. Her works written from the marginal perspective perhaps fit the era of the late Showa period and Heisei period, in which people started to travel to foreign countries much more easily than before, not just as immigrants. Ohba writes about her literary effort to write from the periphery in “The Soul of Vagabond,” to which I referred in Introduction:

Japanese literature has greatly changed by authors and critics who had experienced living in foreign countries for a long time and by Korean authors residing in Japan. At least, they have abilities to observe Japan not only from the inside but also from the outside. Living in a foreign country for a little over ten years, I also have tried to receive the language (*kotoba*) spoken by the primitive people of nature (*shizenjin*) and to speak that kind of language from myself too. I name it the soul of vagabond, and I, as a literary scholar, feel proud of the fact that I continue to have that soul.<sup>73</sup>

In this thesis, I have tried to show that “the soul of vagabond” that Ohba cherishes can be rephrased as “the soul of yamamba.” Nowadays, there are many immigrants in many countries and Japan is no exception. In order to obtain workers, the Japanese government has actively accepted foreigners from many countries. When we live with foreigners, it is an ethical issue to think about how we can accept them without forcing them to change their cultures; when we live in foreign countries, we need to be responsible for creating a friendly atmosphere by approaching foreign cultures. Ohba set her debut novel *The Three Crabs* in the community of foreigners at the beginning of her career. Compared to the story in which the protagonist Yuri escapes from the community of her husband and friends and does not go back to her house even at its end, *Kiri no tabi* is Ohba’s conscious project to leave the yamamba-like character in the human society, no matter how marginal it is. It will be too naïve to think, however, that the yamamba can

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<sup>73</sup> Ohba, “The Soul of Vagabond,” 131.

live in the actual society without suffering from being imposed particular identities. The bigotry of prejudices against women and immigrants is difficult to eradicate, and many of Ohba's works can be read as an alarm bell for this problem. Yet, Ohba may have grappled with the bigotry from the philosophical point of view by thinking about how to transcend the border between the self and the other and by not letting her characters stay in one place or one country; when her characters live in a certain place, whether it be Alaska, Sweden, Niigata, or Tokyo, the place is treated as a temporary residence. In order to make each of the places that she uses habitable for the yamamba characters, it was necessary for Ohba to construct a borderless space in which Yuri, Fu, Tsukiko, and Yurie are able to establish the amorphous relationships with others and their environments.

After her death in May, 2007, *Gunzō* published a special issue featuring Ohba Minako. In that issue, Kawamura Jirō, a scholar of German literature, Kuroi Senji, a novelist, and Inaba Mayumi, a novelist and a poet, discussed Ohba's works in relation to Japanese classical literature and foreign literatures. Along with other articles in the same issue, Kawamura confesses that he was astonished by her debut novella *The Three Crabs*. In order to describe the shock he experienced, Kawamura uses phrases such as “a feeling of strangeness” and “seasoning by foreign literature,” and says, “the strangeness comes from the fact that it [*The Three Crabs*] is not written along the commonsensical lines of Japanese literature.”<sup>74</sup> What Kawamura says about Ohba in relation to foreign literature and in relation to Japanese classical literature is suggestive: in contrast to Natsume Sōseki who went to England and “very seriously struggled [with foreign literature],” “Ohba does

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<sup>74</sup> Kawamura Jirō, Kuroi Senji, and Inaba Mayumi, “Ohba sakuhin to koten, gaikoku bungaku, soshite, kyōhansha” 大庭作品と古典、外国文学、そして、共犯者 [Ohba's Works and Japanese Classics, Foreign Literatures, and an accomplice], *Gunzō* 群像 62, no. 8 (2007): 225.

not give us an impression that she forced herself to accept (or adopt)” any elements from foreign literature into her works;<sup>75</sup> “[a]lthough she is well versed in Japanese classical literature, she, without adhering to it, has some elements that are communicative with the foreign. It is precisely there that I see this author’s originality.”<sup>76</sup> Ohba’s works have many references to foreign literatures such as Greek Mythologies, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Faulkner, Joyce, and so forth. At the same time, she refers to *Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters, 710)* in her *Katachi mo naku* and uses Japanese folklores as her stories’ scaffolds. As a yamamba, who can use the *kotoba* that does not belong to any specific race or nation, Ohba produced many works that were accepted into Japanese literary canon with the sense of shock because she brought a new perspective by considering yamamba’s amorphous traits as immigrants and vagabonds’ rootless ones which lead to the absence of hierarchy.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 234.

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