

OH Haji—what drops out of stitches

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Going through “*The letters from sister*” by OH Haji, viewers’ relations to and impressions of the work seemed to change gradually as they entered inside the work. At the end of a wide space is something like a large curtain made up of hemp ropes hanging from the ceiling, dividing a small back-room and the outer space. One end of it reaches the floor and turns into three chairs. With a coarsely woven part and straight ropes hanging down, it looks like unfinished knitting. The knitted part of hemp ropes reminds me of women’s handwork and everyday life while the thick, coarse texture, a smell of oil rising from hemp ropes as well as the remaining threads give the work hardness, strength to face up to something, and a quality of covering something inside rather than flexibility and receptiveness generated by the plasticity and wrapping nature of fabric.

Despite its screening nature, the central part of the curtain is open with several bundles hooked on the wall so that viewers are led inside. On the wall of the place that looks like a small room, a seascape is projected and two frames of embroidery on canvas are hanging. On the two frames, “DEAREST” and “YASASHII (sweet and kind in Japanese)” are embroidered respectively with beeswax and white thread. These two words come from a novel.

In “*The letters from sister*” produced by OH Haji this time, “*OBASAN*”¹ written by Joy KOGAWA is used as the motif. Joy KOGAWA tells the story of a Japanese-Canadian persecuted as an enemy during the Second World War as seen through the eyes of a third generation Japanese-Canadian woman. Revisiting the memories as a child, the writer describes those days and the dark period of the war through her small world such as family relationships and everyday life. “*The letters from sister*,” the title of OH Haji’s work comes from the diary based on letters written by the heroine’s aunt who used to write letters to her sister, the heroine’s mother, living in Japan. Some passages were extracted from the book and copied as part of the installation

¹ Joy KOGAWA, *OBASAN*, PENGUIN, Toronto, 1983 [1981].

along with the pages. The page numbers get lower as you proceed to the interior of the room so that you go back to the past chronologically. The letters copied with a pencil from a whole page are arranged randomly on white pages. While describing disastrous wartime situations, those letters appeal to visitors to fill in the blank space of the margin with their imaginary complementary stories. As you proceed further reading those letters, you will find yourself involved in the work unconsciously, which first looked towering in the distance. That feeling resembles what you experience when you are reading a novel and somehow getting into the world of it, but at the same time, you feel as if you were getting into your own inner world through imagination leading you into the blank space. After reading a part of the diary, which portrays everyday life and at the same time makes us feel the fear of encroaching waves of the war, I thought this heart-warming space of the work that reminded me of the inside of a room or “home” seemed to be turning into an inward-looking space firmly closed against the outside world.

I was told that the above-mentioned “YASASHII” is a word that appears as it is in the original book written in English. Here Oh reads the writer’s intention to retain such a feeling or emotion as she finds too difficult to translate in the community of Japanese-Canadians where English has become their everyday language. Words that are not translatable are probably those from which we do not want to lose even a single drop of meaning.

Having studied dyeing and weaving, Oh mainly produces works with cloth employing embroidery, dyeing and weaving techniques. Above all, she uses the motif of the ethnic costume, which is considered to be representing each ethnic thought and history in the embroidery as well as pattern and structure of the woven fabric, or its shape. The style of the ethnic costume was originally produced out of each racial inner desire, but it is regarded and dealt with as the symbol of each ethnic category viewed from both the inside and the outside when different races confront with each other. Therefore, defiling the ethnic costume does not merely mean soiling clothes---it is interpreted as a disgrace to the racial pride or open hostility to the race. The whole personal history made with women’s hands at home and handed down from generation to generation by blood- and region-related people is partly compelled to bear the social and political symbol. The ethnic costume is made

to have such public quality by the power that has nothing to do with ideas and consciousness of the people who made, cherished and preserved such a costume. With these two viewpoints in mind, Oh has chosen the ethnic costume, and tries to throw light on how the symbol is structured from the inside and the outside.

“*Wedding dress for minority race*” (2000) (fig.1) is a work that she consciously produced in regard to her own roots. In the work, a Korean traditional wedding dress is made with old kimono cloths (Japanese ethnic costume) sewn together and is embroidered. Though each of the ethnic costume is what has been handed down from ancestors, it sometimes is endowed with a meaning or plays a role divergent from the individual personal feelings over the course of social and political changes. Concerning the background to her production of the work², Oh refers to the uneasy feeling that she had with people watching her dressed in *chima jeogori* (Korean ethnic costume) in Japanese society, the awareness of those watching and those watched, and a gap in perceptions between the personal feeling for clothes, and social, historical representation given from outside. In “*Landscape on the boundary*” (2006) (fig.2), an imaginary owner of the ethnic costume becomes a “wandering Roma.” That ethnic ikat (kasuri)-woven costume reminds me of an ethnic costume somewhere in East Asia. A wanderer does not have a specific hometown. In other words, it is dropped out of a major section like “*Wedding dress for minority race*,” and while it is the “ethnic costume” for those whose existence has been concealed in the mainstream history, it looks like the “ethnic costume” for those who are trying consciously to escape from uncritical representation that is trite, stiffened, and insensitively violent. And the very act of weaving that costume by hand seems to reveal the attitude to verify her present position critically and consciously to reconstruct it, not escaping from uncritical representation.

On the other hand, the motif of the ethnic costume used in her work does not refer only to race, community or society. A red long undergarment repeatedly used as kimono underwear, as well as the work of weaving by hand, and wedding costume and clothes made for special occasions are

² A minority race referred to in the title of the work is “zainichi (Koreans living in Japan).” (OH Haji “*What does the ethnic costume represent?*” YCAR Visiting Scholar with Discussant Ted GOOSSEN, York Centre for Asian Research, York University, 1st May 2009.

related to a viewpoint on “women” and the subject of representation of “femininity.” Concerning the ethnic costume, Oh uses such expression as “a second skin that reveals one’s inner world and femininity.”³ I think her perception of this “skin” is related to “self” in contrast to “society,” or femininity. Her work “*Inside of her skirt*” (2006) (fig.3) is partly made to pay homage to her late grandmother. At the same time, it is about an untold history of a woman who lived in a certain period, and a memory of whose existence disappears with her body. Lifeless organdy cloth is spread over the room, and one end of it is unraveled to threads as if returning to its being before birth. The work that reminds me of a cast-off skin seems to be pulling wandering memories together to give them a form not as a record but as physical senses or a sign of presence. In “*Flower spot*” (2007) (fig.4), the trace of its vanishing existence looks more directly related to femininity. White cloth is lightly spread out like a soft skirt worn by a woman. A thread hanging in the center looks like a hollowed-out torso suggesting an absent existence. Electric bulbs set inside the cloth give soft light with an air of warmth, which makes the viewer feel the residue of the temperature of the absent person who took off the clothes. What it expresses is neither related to the outside world nor memories and records expressed in words. It expresses personal memories engraved by the sensory, inner memories and the traces of experience, that is, what is remembered on a body. For instance, it is not a record written down about some definite event, but memories of something generating from daily accumulations and repetitions that cling firmly for unstated reason, as if it were a stone in the stomach or the opening of a wound that would never close nicely. They are not given chances to be recorded. If you could engrave your personal history only as the whole of your physical perceptions, their existence would not be recorded as your history in words. On the other hand, however, they could probably be recorded through the technique of making the ethnic costume, songs, or the non-linguistic method employed silently in things inherited from generation to generation. Thus, what is considered non-existent may be handed down along with non-material thing while making variations. In the diary of above-mentioned “*The letters from sister*,” some incident or definite event is not put in front, but what the writer sensed in her daily life (if something was in the air) are accumulated and give a structure to, for example, the year

³ According to her portfolio turned in to ACAC.

of 1941-2.⁴ It shows a kind of “memories” expressed as the accumulation of fragments of everyday life, and there you will see how “history” is woven.

There is no doubt that both Korean clothes and femininity are related to the history of OH Haji to begin with, a woman with double identity. That history, however, cannot be kept merely as her personal history. In order to capture the future, her experiences in the past that is linked to the present needed to be probed deeply.⁵ For that reason, the starting point of personal memories is to link with common memories handed down by generations. Ideas and emotions do not result from some specific events, but are generated through accumulations and nurtured through repetitions. Her attempt to escape from representation could be likened to a fabric woven by repeating warps and wefts over a long period of time in that she is searching for a kind of method in which left-out things can be connected only through piling multiple layers of them. She is not dismantling structures at hand, looking at or feeling left-out things and physical wounds, but trying to mold them in a different manner.

Let me go back to “*The letters to sister.*” Three chairs are born at the end of the hemp rope curtain. According to Oh, the chairs reflect the relations such as one for “me” as the self, another for “you” as another person, and the last for “me and you” as society or community.⁶ The world is not comprised of me alone. The world, in which consciousness of me, you and society as another extensive consciousness are intertwined, represents some patterns like fabric, and probably different patterns are visible from different viewpoints. None of them has priority. Of the work of weaving, Oh stated, “I have a feeling that the warp is a time-axis, and with the weft passing sideways, some space is formed. The cross-section represents existence.”⁷ In that sense, a long hanging hemp rope curtain is considered to be a metaphor

⁴ The diary in the novel was written in 1941-2, and on December 8 of that year, Pearl Harbor was attacked and the Pacific War began.

⁵ Rebecca JENNISON analyzed OH Haji’s works that are based on the themes of personal memory and family history by using the concept of “postmemory” with which Marianne HIRSCH analyzed how family photos were used by Holocaust survivors and artists.

Rebecca JENNISON, “‘Postmemory’ in the Work of OH Haji and KUM Soni” LEE Chong-Hwa (edit.) “*Zanshoh no Oto, Future of Asia, Politics, and Art*” Iwanami Shoten, 2009, pp. 212-216.

⁶ From her e-mail answering to the writer’s questions on January 29, 2010.

⁷ Ibid.

for the fabric of history, and knitting is unfinished. The half of that hemp rope curtain is hanging vertically in the state of thread. If it is a metaphor for the fabric of history, it suggests a comparison between the woven history (events that took place) and beings that exist without being woven. Inactively hanging threads look as if they were enduring to accept everything including the woven history and what drops out from there. On the other hand, even the woven part has its end unwoven and goes back to threads. These several years, Oh has repeatedly used a style in which fabric in the work comes loose, gets woven, and gets undone again to disperse. It shows her attitude to dismantle prescribed representation and reconstructs it.

“Everywhere the old woman stands as the true and rightful owner of the earth. She is the bearer of keys to unknown doorways and to a network of astonishing tunnels. She is the possessor of life’s infinite personal details.”

(Joy KOGAWA, “*OBASAN*”, Anchorbooks, New York, pp.18—19.)

Translated by NISHIZAWA Miki