Snapshots From the Past: Time and Memory in Kyoko Mori's **Shizuko's Daughter**

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Résumé *: Grâce aux descriptions verbales de photographies et de dessins, le roman de Kyoko Mori,* ***Shizuko's Daughter****, relate les efforts de sa protagoniste, Yuki Okuda, pour retenir ses souvenirs de sa mère décédée. Lorsqu'elle évolue de consommatrice à créatrice d'images, Yuki découvre qu'elle doit apprendre à vivre dans le temps présent et non dans ses souvenirs.*

Summary*: Through verbal descriptions of photographs and drawings, Kyoko Mori explores the efforts of Yuki Okuda, protagonist of* ***Shizuko's Daughter****, to hold on to memories of her dead mother. As Yuki moves from consumer of images made by others to maker of her own, she realizes that a person must live in time and not in memory.*

Shizuko's Daughter (1993), Kyoko Mori's first novel and an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, chronicles the adolescence of Yuki Okuda, a Japanese girl who experiences the suicide of her mother, her father's remarriage, and the death of a grandfather.[1] Born in Japan and educated at the university level in the United States, Mori is now a Briggs-Copeland lecturer in creative writing at Harvard University. She describes the novel as the story of three generations of the women in one family ("Kyoko Mori: A Personal Glimpse"): the adolescent protagonist, Yuki; her mother, the Shizuko of the book's title; and Shizuko's mother and Yuki's grandmother, Masa. Mori's memoir *The Dream of Water* (1995) and her volume of essays *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* (1997) underscore the autobiographical basis of the novel. Her own mother, like Yuki's in the book, committed suicide in 1969, and Mori's father, like Yuki's father Hideki, subsequently remarried and brought into the family a stepmother to whom the adolescent Mori could not adjust. Both Mori's memoir and her essays

provide more detailed and analytic accounts of the death of her mother and of her own painful adolescence. Reading them reveals a great deal about the degree to which she reimagines her life in *Shizuko's Daughter*. In addition to leaving out her younger brother Jumpei, she adjusts the novel's timeline, a change that reinforces the photography metaphors used throughout the book. "I did not write about my experience of growing up in Japan until I was in graduate school" at the University of Wisconsin, Mori notes. "I first wrote a story about the grandmother, which turned out to be the last chapter" of *Shizuko's Daughter*, "then a few stories about the daughter, a story about the mother, and then some more about the grandmother. A few years later, I filled in the gaps, developed the characters more consistently, and turned the collection into a novel" ("Kyoko Mori: A Personal Glimpse"). Even in its present form, *Shizuko's Daughter* reveals its genesis as a set of short stories.

The book's sixteen chapters are arranged chronologically, from "Housebound (March 1969)," in which Shizuko narrates the final hours of her final day and commits suicide, to "Epilogue (May 1976)," in which Shizuko's mother, Masa, reflects on Yuki's emergence from the emotional paralysis induced by the trauma of Shizuko's death. Masa recognizes that her granddaughter, now a college student with her first boyfriend, has survived her painful adolescence intact. Mori underscores this fact without making the connection overtly, by having Masa find a newly emerged cicada in her garden: this insect has spent seven years underground, seven years being the period Yuki has lived through since her mother's suicide. To prevent birds from getting the cicada, Masa puts it on a peony leaf and places insect and leaf on the Buddhist altar in her room. After a nap, which she takes with a four-year-old grandson named Tadashi, Masa awakens to find the cicada flying vigorously about the room. She opens a window, and "immediately, the cicada flew out, merging into the blue sky" (207-08). Tadashi has been reluctant to use the wooden slide in the garden ever since the death of his grandfather, Masa's husband Takeo, who had built it. Today he resumes playing on the slide. "Masa stood by the open window and watched the child still running up the steps and going down the slide. She laughed, and cried copious tears, until her chest and shoulders ached from joy" (208).

This final episode of *Shizuko's Daughter* represents the way in which Mori handles time and memory in the book's chapters, all of which exist as distinct narrative units treating time both dramatically and statically, from the limited third-person omniscience of a character, usually Yuki, who recalls at least once in each chapter a significant event from the past. The juxtaposition of time periods produces each chapter's particular effect, theme, and tone, always without any commentary other than that of its focal character. Masa, the grandmother, is the focus of the final chapter and half of two earlier ones: "After the Rain (August 1975)," in which she re-

calls the death of her husband Takeo, and "Yellow Mittens and Early Violets (March 1972)," which is narrated in part from within Takeo's mind. One chapter is written from the perspective of Yuki's father, Hideki; another from the viewpoint of her stepmother, Hanae; and, of course, the first told from inside the consciousness of Yuki's mother, Shizuko. These shifts away from Yuki occur for a number of reasons. They record events and feelings that complement and contrast with her own. They also add depth to the treatment of her struggle to deal with the losses of her mother and grandfather, with her father's remarriage, and with her hostile relationship with her stepmother.

"Acceptance of losing others and awareness of mortality," claims Roberta Seelinger Trites in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), "shape much of the discourse surrounding death" in novels written for and about young adults. "It seems," she observes, "that death has far more power over the adolescent imagination than any human institution possibly could" (119). While she does not discuss Mori's book, Trites would surely argue that *Shizuko's Daughter* handles this emerging adolescent sense of mortality in ways that are typical of novels written for young adults. Fiction written for younger children depicts death as part of life's cycle, often using it to symbolize a natural and necessary separation from parents. Trites suggests that novels written for adolescents represent the deaths of friends, parents, and grandparents as the end of something and not as a necessary stage in the fictional protagonist's maturation. "Indeed," she claims, "I would submit that death is the *sine qua non* of adolescent literature, the defining factor that distinguishes it both from children's and adult literature" (118). The treatment of death in *Shizuko's Daughter* conforms, in broad general terms, to the general pattern she proposes from an analysis of Lois Lowry's *A Summer to Die* (1977), Francesca Lia Block's *Witch Baby* (1991), and Trudy Krishner's *Spite Fences* (1994). In Mori's book, like the three texts Trites discusses, death "occurs onstage" as part of the dramatized action; it is not, as it would probably be in fiction written for younger readers, reported indirectly through narrative summary or the words of a character. Both Shizuko's suicide and Grandfather Takeo's heart attack occur as events that Yuki sees as "untimely, violent, and unnecessary," and certainly the first of these deaths results in Yuki's "loss of innocence" (Trites 120-21) about the nature of the adult experience.

Ripped cruelly out of the world of childhood, Yuki faces the need to make sense of her life. Discussing the fact that she chose to work with materials from her own adolescence, Mori notes that "the story that later became the final chapter . . . of *Shizuko's Daughter* . . . was the first . . . in which I was able to write about what I knew but didn't understand" ("Staying True to the Story"). The process of understanding the self is both the subject and the theme of *Shizuko's Daughter*. Similar to the authors that Martha

Westwater reads in the context of critical statements made by Julia Kristeva, Mori dares to "unmask for the young the constructed nature of reality and to question the unitary nature of the self" (xvii). As Yuki moves from her initial efforts to deny time and to live in the past before her mother's suicide, she learns a great deal about how reality is shaped by her own mind and about how the culture in which she lives provides the grammar by which that shaping takes place.

In each of the sixteen chapters of *Shizuko's Daughter*, Mori shows characters mentally juxtaposing events in the present with events recalled in memory. Yuki, her grandparents, her father, and her stepmother — and her mother as well — are conscious, even painfully so, of being alive in time. Time brings change, loss, and separation; Yuki's resistance, her refusal to accept her mother's death and her father's remarriage, really derives from very human impulses. For example, she carries a photograph of her parents' wedding in her handbag the day her father Hideki marries Hanae. As the guests pass a bowl of sake from one to another, sipping from it to signify their acceptance of the new couple as married, Yuki visualizes the photograph. "In a blur, she saw her mother standing in front of the temple gate in her white wedding dress among wisteria blossoms and the spring breeze, her body a soft weight against the black sleeve. Mama, I can't do it, she thought, I can't let him forget" (26). When the bowl of sake reaches her, Yuki brings "her heels down with all her weight, dropping the bowl and shattering it against the tabletop — just as, on the morning of the funeral, her father had shattered her mother's rice bowl against the doorsteps so her ghost would not haunt his household or anyone in it" (26).

The passage seems to invite a reading that deals with issues of cultural difference for its target audience of English-speaking American readers — marriage traditions in Shintoism, Japanese customs related to death, the dynamics of family relationships in Japan. To give way to such a reading, however, obscures Mori's strategies as a writer, whose techniques make *Shizuko's Daughter* an effective reading experience for those who have only the vaguest ideas about Japanese culture. One key to Mori's craft is the photograph that Yuki carries in her handbag to her father's wedding to Hanae. On the simplest level, it represents her refusal, perhaps her inability only a year after her mother's death, to accept that Hideki wants to get on with his life. She cannot let go of the events of the past, and at this time of her life, she does not even want to. Toward the end if the novel, her father thinks, "Someone should have taught Yuki to forget the past" (154). By this point in the narrative, Yuki has left for college and has indicated that she will not be communicating with her father and stepmother. In this scene, Hideki is in the garden of his home, burning Shizuko's clothes and personal effects, which had been stored in the attic since her death. Hideki remembers the annual bonfire, a religious ritual, that took place each year in the village in which he was born. "Of all the old fashioned rituals, Hideki

thought now, that fire was the best. It taught people to put things behind, forget, embrace the new" (154).

The tension between the two perspectives — Hideki's desire to forget the past and Yuki's refusal to live in the present, at least throughout most of *Shizuko's Daughter* — may be the major conflict at work in the text. One of Mori's methods of tracing the working out of the conflict, as noted above, comes from her handling of things such as her parents' wedding photograph. In fact, nearly every chapter of Mori's novel refers to a snapshot, a photograph, or a frozen frame of film in relation to Yuki's memories.[2] In the second chapter of *Shizuko's Daughter*, which deals with the funeral of her mother, Yuki looks away from her Aunt Aya, who is talking about Shizuko's death, and sees a photograph of the family group on the wall of her mother's bedroom. The light outside the room casts the shadows of fir trees across the glass; and Yuki sees it as "like a double exposure: the moving branches outside superimposed on the still photograph of her family three or four years ago. In the photograph her mother stood between Yuki and her father, one hand on his arm and the other on Yuki's shoulder" (9). The image captures the emotional dynamic among the members of the Okuda family; at the same time, of course, it also dramatizes the juxtaposition of the two conceptions of time at work in the minds of Mori's characters. As human beings, they experience time in different ways, as frozen bits of memory like snapshots and as the fluid movement of momentary experience.

M.M. Bakhtin's discussion of the chronotope, which he defines as time-space units in fiction, provides a useful theoretical model for an analysis of this narrative strategy at work in *Shizuko's Daughter*. Without applying the concept too heavy-handedly, Bakhtin's description of the chronotope does seem to explain what Mori is doing with her representation of time. "Time, as it were, thickens," Bakhtin suggests in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), "takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (84). This quotation describes the mental process by which the photographic image prompts memory, even comes to replace it in Yuki's mind. As a high school runner, she remembers a photograph Shizuko had taken of her, in third grade, on the day she won a race during a school athletic competition. "Yuki's left shoulder and right leg had just gotten in front of the other girl, although the rest of their bodies were still in line. In the far corner of the picture, the finish-line tape blurred white" (44). This is an image in which, to borrow Bakhtin's words, space becomes charged with time and history and time itself thickens to a standstill. As an image of Yuki running, it represents her mother's experience and was taken to capture the moment for memory; but having been transformed by photography, it has become Yuki's memory as well. It is how she sees and remembers the School Sports Day and the race she won in third grade. Trites would probably point out that

Mori here describes photography as something that "transforms images of people — acting subjects — into objects, in the process giving them a new significance they might not have previously held" (125). Like the photograph of Yuki's parents on their wedding day, a time when Yuki was not present, it is somebody else's embodiment of time that has been given to Yuki as a text that can interpret the events of the past. It is these images, these readings of time, these memories that tie her so firmly to a static sense of the truth and keep her from accepting time as inevitably fluid.

Trites claims that, in adolescent fiction, "one photograph or a series of related photographs provide" the focal character of a particular book with "a recursive way of working through conflict" (137). Clearly, Mori gives Yuki this strategy to use while grappling with her adolescent problems. Writing the book may have served the same function for Mori herself. Trites turns to Roland Barthes, in particular to *Camera Lucida*, for concepts by means of which she can explain the narrative effects when an author references photographs and photography in a text that is verbally constructed and aimed at the young adult reader. She concludes — at least where the novels she discusses by Lowry, Block, and Krishner are concerned — that the use of "camera metaphors" serves as a literary way "to explore agency as a linguistic construct that empowers the adolescent" (125). Yuki starts to achieve a sense of agency when she moves from being the passive recipient of images created by others and embodying their interpretations of events — her parents' wedding photograph, the posed portrait of the family hanging in her dead mother's bedroom, the snapshot of her running a race in the third grade — and becomes the active creator of her own images that embody her own impressions and feelings about things.

In a chapter of *Shizuko's Daughter* titled "Grievances (May 1993)," Hanae remembers a conversation in which, annoyed at Yuki's lack of cooking and cleaning skills, she asks the girl what her mother taught her. "She taught me things you wouldn't know about," Yuki shoots back. "She taught me to draw and paint. She taught me the names of flowers and stories to tell from memory" (89-90). She remembers eating a tube of yellow paint because the color was so lovely it had to taste good (33-34), and when Hanae insists on throwing away the last of the colorful dresses and skirts Shizuko had made for her daughter, Yuki finds that she can hold on to them by drawing them from memory. "When she was done with the clothes, she made sketches of the tea set, the glazed plates, the white goblets, and the other pottery pieces that her stepmother had thrown out. . . . [S]he didn't want to forget anything" (109). Like Yuki's holding on to photographs of her mother's life, these drawings attempt to hold on to the past — but in this case, it is her own memories that Yuki tries to retain. That is a significant step toward emotional health, one by which Yuki learns, consciously or unconsciously, that the images we make — the drawings and photographs we create — embody the feelings of the creator as much as the de-

tails of the experience.

Noting that Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is, among other things, an "elegy" for his own mother, Trites goes on to suggest that "Photographs have as their subtext the death of the person photographed; they are both memory and memorial" (135). It is important, from both a historical and a creative perspective, to note that Mori sends Yuki to college to study art in the final chapters of *Shizuko's Daughter*. Her adolescent drawings of dresses and plates and goblets are like the photographs Mori references elsewhere in the book: they objectify their subject matter, stop time, and freeze a moment of memory from the past. Unlike the photographs, however, Yuki's drawings take both their images and the feelings associated with them from inside her own mind. Rather than turning to Shizuko's wedding snapshot, for example, and constructing for herself a memory of something she did not actually experience, Yuki here renders things based on what she actually knows and remembers; in addition, she draws them from her own visual perspective. She does not attempt, as she does with the picture of herself in the third grade, to assume the perspective of the observer of that image — her mother Shizuko, the one who took the photograph of the School Sports activity.

At the end of the novel, Yuki signals her recognition of the fact that she cannot keep her mother alive by seeking to inhabit Shizuko's mind. The task is impossible. Yuki looks at photographs of herself taken by Isamu Kimura, her college boyfriend, who is teaching her to use a camera and to develop her own film. She looks at pictures taken the morning of the day her grandfather died and fails to recognize herself. "All three photographs showed her in that field and laughing. Anybody who saw them would think she looked happy. At the time, she had had no idea that her grandfather was dying" (182). The photographs are Isamu's, and they show what he saw and wants to remember of her. They are not something to which Yuki can turn to hold on to her own memories. She has learned, by the end of *Shizuko's Daughter*, that she must seek to embody, as her mother did, her own memories in her own way and for nobody other than herself. Yuki asks her grandmother for some old kimonos to work with as Isamu and she teach themselves to sew. "With her latest letter, Yuki had sent a picture of herself wearing a quilted vest she had made from the kimonos," Masa remembers in the final chapter of the novel. "I wanted to wear the same things you did, only in a different way" (199), Yuki writes.

The point Mori seems to want Yuki to understand as she moves from consumer to creator of images may be that, while the past is important and memories are likewise an important part of self-knowledge, a living person must actually live in time and not in memory. This message comes through when Yuki examines her mother's own sketchbook, something that Hideki saves from the general conflagration decreed by Hanae and mails to Yuki after the death of her grandfather Takeo. She remembers see-

ing a number of the early sketches and watercolors, pictures of her father when hospitalized with tuberculosis before Shizuko and he were married and pictures of Yuki herself as a small child. Yuki does not remember ever seeing the drawings at the end of the sketchbook, ones done during the final family vacation and capturing Shizuko's feelings for her child and her husband. "On the second-to-last page, Yuki found a detailed watercolour portrait of herself holding some daisies to her nose and smiling a big, frank smile. . . . This is how my mother saw me, she thought, such a happy child" (191). The picture of her father Hideki prompts Yuki's memory of an argument between her parents during that vacation, ending with her father bringing her mother flowers from mountain hydrangea. "Rather than complaining to him about the way he walked off," Yuki thinks, "her mother had let him sleep. She had even pressed these flowers to the last page of her sketchbook. She must have wanted to remember his gesture of apology, his coming back to her. She must have loved him still" (192). The drawings give her insight into her mother's feelings and her mother's memories, but Yuki does not attempt, as she did when she was younger, to make them her own. She knows that she must make her own memories, her own life in the present, and that she is finally capable of doing so. Like the cicada her grandmother rescues at the end of its seven years underground, Yuki emerges into a new stage of her life. Westwater notes, looking at Jan Mark's novels *Thunder and Lightnings* (1976) and *Divide and Rule* (1979), something applicable to Mori's novel: "there is always the possibility of change, of a resurrection, as long as the individual continues to search for the other as self and the self as other" (163).

In the penultimate chapter of *Shizuko's Daughter*, "The Effect of Light (August 1975)," which deals with events after the death of her grandfather, Yuki thinks about the photographs she is taking and developing under Isamu's supervision. He teaches her technical things about photography, but he does not try to impose his taste in content or style on her. Yuki remembers the latest roll of film they developed together and one image in particular. She had tried to take a picture of a heron wading in a river, and the lens on her camera had not been adjusted well enough to get a clear image of the bird at the distance it was from her. When Yuki tells Isamu that it is her favorite picture on the roll, he says, "It looks like you were taking a picture of light." Remembering this conversation as she holds her mother's sketchbook, which she has just received in the mail from Hideki, Yuki thinks that her mother "wanted to be that blurred heron at the center of my mind, almost swallowed up by the light around it but always there" (194). It is at this point that she makes the internal adjustment that allows her to telephone Isamu, to accept the emotional tie between them, and then to call him her "boyfriend" (200) when she telephones her grandmother.

In its own way, *Shizuko's Daughter* is the kind of postmodern *bildüngsroman* commonly found in children's and young adult fiction in

the past twenty years. Mori gives the book the kind of "open" conclusion noted by Asfrid Svenson, making it the kind of novel "where questions are left unanswered" (62) and where "we may find uncertainty and the quest for values" (63) rather than the affirmation of conventional moral or ethical value systems. When the readers Mori projected for her book engage with *Shizuko's Daughter*, they recognize the cognitive processes at work. On one level, it is that pattern of knowing, as much as any psychological factor, to which they are responding. Mori wrote the book in English, not in Japanese, and American adolescents are the audience she has targeted. Despite the Japanese setting and the cultural differences that can be isolated from the narrative, Mori's handling of Yuki Okuda's consciousness mimics the way those readers themselves experience time and memory. *Shizuko's Daughter* appeals to them because they recognize as familiar the way Yuki creates memory from experience and reads experience from within the context of memory.

Notes

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2 Mori describes Yuki's grandfather Takeo falling in the kitchen, in the chapter titled "Yellow Mittens and Early Violets (March 1972)," like a frame of film: "Takeo tripped and began to fall forward. The colander flew from his hands, the strawberries scattering everywhere in a red blur" (79). In this case, the description in cinematic terms emphasizes the emotional impact. The reader sees Yuki — or is it Mori? — engaged in the transformation of subject into object.

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