Title: A Girl with the Amoebic Body and her Writing Machine[1]

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Synopsis

Twenty-two year old Akutagawa Prize-winner Kanehara Hitomi begins her third novel, *Amebic*[2] with a three-page long monologue which she calls *sakubun* [錯文], delusional writing, making a pun on *sakubun* [作文], creative writing. The narrator (Kanehara's pseudo-self) finds this *sakubun* (in the former sense) on her desktop and tries to decipher it. It was obviously written by *herself* the night before, but she does not remember writing it. She claims that these *sakubun* do not reveal the unconscious of her psyche,[3] but nonetheless, she reads them in an attempt to get to know more about the writer, that is, *herself*. At a glance this structure appears to produce a two-tiered narrative that reflects a body-mind dualist conception of a self and captures the nature of

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[1] This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of Rio Otomo who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

[2] Kanehara uses this English title (instead of '*amoebic*') which is accompanied by its Japanese reading in small fonts. (2005)

[3] Ibid., p.21.

the human subject which struggles to be a unified whole. As we read further, however, we see the self not only fragments but also multiplies. I firstly locate this text within the broader landscape of popular culture in which images of *manga* girls are ubiquitous. In the second half I examine the unsettling borders between the *amoebic* girl's body and the *amoebic* body of her text, focusing on the emerging speech style of Japanese girls. I conclude this essay with a feminist proposition.

A girl with her own room and her writing machine

As acts of writing on machines – blogging, chatting, e-mailing on the net or text-messaging on the *keitai* [mobile phone] – have become part of daily routines for many Japanese, styles of written texts are rapidly evolving in more daring and expansive directions. For those who grew up believing in the values of the stern-faced modernity of last century, this trend is not so easy to swallow; it is a linguistic makeover led by the 'popular masses', including teenage girls and young women. My inclination to side with the outgoing class of cultural modernists has changed since I encountered a novella written by a young woman. It convinced me that the current trend is proof of the amazing versatility of Japanese language and I should rather be excited about it. I will discuss this text by locating it within the popular landscape of the past decade, assuming that the 'post-1995' cultural phenomena of Japan belong to a new paradigm.[4] This essay is not a linguistic investigation, nor a sociological analysis of the affects of digital technology on the contemporary life. My aim, instead, is to present a feminist reading of the text that embodies *écriture féminine*. In her frequently quoted essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*,[5] Hélène Cixous advocates a writing which cuts the circuit of Western logocentrism, under which all modernist works have been operated, including those written in Japanese. Her feminist message, 'Write yourself. Your body must be heard,' is therefore not necessarily gender specific, nor culturally exclusive, her use of the term *feminine* applies widely, embracing all differences such as race, class and gender. Nonetheless, gender difference is used by Cixous as the marker to conceive a writing that overcomes the domination of logos, and the 'body' that marks that difference is used

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[4] The year 1995 is regarded by many as the marker for a paradigmatic shift in Japan. It reflects the emergence of new communal psyche after the Great Kansai Earthquake and the Sarin Gas Attack on the Tokyo Subway System by the Aum Shinrikyo. See Azuma Hiroki, *Mj   genron F kai: posutomodan, otaku, sekusyuariti* (2003, pp. 24-28). Kato Norihiro also points this out in relation to Murakami Haruki's works in *Murakami Haruki ier   peeji, paato 2* (2004).

[5] 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976).

as the key vehicle to approach it. Following Cixous, I use the term 'girl' as a conceptual position to apply more inclusively than it is usually purported to do.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, it was common knowledge that girls did not enjoy violent computer games as much as boys did.[6] Girls often felt alienated by the contents of the games on offer in addition to the exclusive nature of technologies at the time. While available computer game products were goal-oriented, hyper-tensioned and quick-paced, some young people including many girls were interested in the narratives of the games. They found it more engaging to weave human relations – which required narratives and texts – in the slower pace suited to the comfort of the body. In recent years these people have found in virtual messaging – blogging, chatting, e-mailing and mobile-phone-messaging – a means of expression and an outlet for their creativity. Game software producers also began to target these consumers. The so-called '*otaku* boys and *yaoi* girls', who are immersed in the fictive world of *manga* and *anime* characters, pursue the fulfilment of their pleasure by creating their own stories with such characters, and share them with other like-minded readers through their communal network.[7] They even create new characters by 'sucking up' the system of a particular *anime* or a game, using their technological expertise. The significance of authorship and originality is reduced in this process, and the borders between authors and readers, producers and consumers are increasingly blurred.[8] There is freedom for any reader to become an author as long as the person is an avid reader of existing works. Each piece of work is heavily coded with references to other works in the genre

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[6] Note that I am talking about two groups of young people who have girl-like tendencies and boy-like tendencies, without claiming these features to be gender exlusive.

[7] Azuma Hiroki, in *M jo genron* (op. cit., p.7), preliminary defines *otaku* as those who are immersed in the subculture of *manga*, *anime*, *light-novels*, figurines, computer games, computer technologies and special effects and form a tight-net community of their own. *Dojinshi* (publications on specific interests) and *comike* (comic markets), and their equivalents on the internet offer such communal spaces. Azuma's definition of *otaku* quickly shifts to address wider cultural phenomena, demonstrating that the *otaku*-type culture is no longer confined in the subculture realm.

[8] Some authors even make pornographic stories based on their own original girl character, aiming at the 'other' type of consumers, the act of which in effect deconstructs the original-copy dichotomy. See Azuma, *Dobutsukasuru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* (2001, pp. 84-95).

which are spread across the range of media such as *manga*, *anime*, games and advertisement as a new addition.[9]

All of these are happening through the use of the machine. The machine that promises a *jouissance* – the pleasure that has no end – is now owned by girls as well as boys. Images of girl characters have been produced, marketed and consumed by the network of *otaku* whose age range spans from the mid-teens to middle-aged men.[10] Some girls have gained a way of facing their own sexuality away from a male gaze. The so-called *yaoi manga*, in which woman writers create homosexual love stories out of male *manga* characters, are produced for women's own consumption.[11] Nevertheless, in the dominant trend girl characters (idols) are the prominent fetish of 'otaku sexuality' whose attribution now extends beyond a small clique of nerdy men in their private room. How does a *girl* find her own story to live, when she is surrounded by the worshipers of her virtual images that are loaded with imagined sexuality? I will keep this question in mind throughout my discussion below.

Otsuka Eiji argues that the *manga*-like world of virtual reality is no longer a fantasy out there to escape into in order to avoid facing the reality right here.[12] It instead exists within as one of the narratives standing in line for us to read and write 'into'. In the post-modernist era there is no grand narrative to dictate our vision. We feel freer to create our own stories. In visualising her own life story, a girl would negotiate with various pieces of information, the data that include the imagined girlhood which circulates through *otaku* products and the media at large.[13] The small

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[9] A girl character called, '*De- ji- kyaratto'* began its appearance in an advertisement and was later given by the *otaku* fan various personal traits of its own. (Azuma 2003, p. 31; 2001, pp. 63-37).

[10] Saito Tamaki considers sexuality as a marker in defining *otaku*, hence the exclusion of the low-teens from the age range. Find more discussions on the age designation in Saito, *Sento bishojo no seishin bunseki* (2000).

[11] Kotani Mari points out that this is paralleled in the US as 'slash fiction' or 'K/S fiction' named after the love stories between Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*. See more on the relationship between 'K/S fiction' and '*Yaoi* fiction' in *Techno-Gynesis* (1994, pp. 231-252).

[12] Otsuka Eiji, *'Otaku' no seishinshi: 1980 nendairon* (2004, p. 18).

[13] From the innocent heroines of Miyazaki Hayao's animations to the more explicitly sexual girl characters in the pachinko parlor ads for example are viewed side by side by young girls, as they go about with their everyday lives.

narratives she tries out through text-messaging and blogging are her active participation in weaving the web of human relationship and creating her place within it. The acts satisfy her urge to read and write small narratives, and the safe distance that she keeps in this new relationship through the machine is a key factor in her initial access to the game. Whether to go further with it or to withdraw from it at any moment is under her control. Even though the relationship that she develops through the machine may be called simulacrum (or not real), that does not diminish its role. A relationship is after all a narrative that people construct for their own consumption. I have so far argued that story making is alive and kicking in Japan, and girls are leading that trend. I should not be too hasty, however, in saying that this trend has widened the scope of young girls' self-expression or communication. Girls' close relationship to the writing machine might be creating another mode of binding that would hold them back from reaching towards a liberated personhood, if not exactly a revival of the objectified images of a secretary and her typewriter.[14] The images of girls with keypads – of her mobile phone and her computer – offering her (body of) texts, her photos and her voice messages, are visualised in print everywhere in the popular sphere, and imagined intensely by the desiring gaze of *otaku* at large.

The body as a terminus

Let us look at the mobile phone, the fetish object of the masses: the pearly tint; the smooth texture; the beckoning light; and the weight, neither too heavy nor light, which are designed to give the holder the right level of confidence in their palm. Strings of netsuke-like ornaments are hung from every phone, as if to do so were a national superstition. What makes the mobile phone different from, say, the folding umbrella, is the fact that the former is the locus of human interaction, including one's own interaction to oneself through reading and writing *about* one. Messages arrive and depart, while one manages them with the confidence of a station master. While the mobile phone is in this process felt like an extension of one's body, one's body itself becomes a terminus, a communication processing station called *tanmatsu* in Japanese. Azuma Hiroki presents a 'database model' in his *Doobutsuka suru posutomodan: otaku kara mita nihon shakai* [The Animalising Postmodern: An Otaku View of Japanese Societies, 2001] to explain the ways in which the Self constitutes in the postmodern world view. According to Azuma, the Self is

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[14] While the invention of typewriter in late 19th Century Europe gave a woman access to the act of writing and a means of getting her own income, it also emphasised her gender role as a part of mechanical writing machine that does not create words but diligently reproduces the master's words. See Okubo (2000, pp. 148-49).

the key terminus from which one continuously engages in the task of reading and writing 'into' the lined-up small narratives which are the available data for consumption. The self constitutes itself by collecting and processing these data without assuming a pre-determined profile. This Self, I would argue, cannot be seen as the two-tiered Freudian iceberg model with the subterranean unconscious and the conscious tip. In short, there is no 'true' self to dig deep and symbolise in the postmodern discourse of selfhood. Azuma's database model supports my position that the 'I' is 'the surfaces of the body' on which multiple stories are written and read. Girls with their writing machine are now in Japan heavily engaged in writing and reading small narratives exclusively about themselves. Their body is a terminus – *tanmatsu* – and various stories keep appearing on their body screen as they write and read continuously.

The protagonist of *Amebic*, Kanehara Hitomi's third novel, stares at her computer screen, writing and reading texts about her. She saves each text in a folder; the desktop will be soon covered by such folders. She is aware of the fact that there is no final word that will once-and-for-all give her the comfort of imagining herself as a solid and undivided whole. Her suffering is not psychological, but an embodiment of the unsettling relationship between her bodily existence in the world and the disembodied actuality of her life. She lives in a comfortable apartment in central Tokyo, leading a privileged life in one of the most prosperous cities in the world. She has everything, and yet, nothing is there for her, which is exemplified in her choice of food – plenty of alcohol, pieces of pickled radish or cucumber, and a variety of nutritional supplements. She lives without actual food (I will discuss this later). There is, however, one consolation in her room – the machine with its keyboard and the words she writes and reads on it.

It seems that the act of writing on the machine have revived the status of written texts and enhanced the sense of sharing and belonging within the Japanese language community. Typing involves the sensual pleasure of your finger-tips touching little keys, which then produces a continual pitter-patter that is comforting to hear, while texts appearing on the screen are pleasurable to your eye. Text-messaging in Japanese is a complex process, involving a variety of options and requiring more selections to be made than English text-messaging. Each time you spell a word, you are given a list of kanji characters to choose from for your intended meaning. When you are confronted there by a vast breadth of meaning, there is a temptation to shift the meaning of your choice without changing its sound. There is no need of putting quotation marks to show its idiosyncratic use. You are allowed to be unique as everyone else, which is what I would call the computer-induced democracy of Japanese language. If a girl previously felt

inhibited to write in public because of her incompetence in vocabulary, or her lack of calligraphy skills, she can now not only write, but also be creative and become an author with her own unique style. Dismantling formal sentence-structures, creating a set of vocabulary according to your needs and indulging in word-play are now rife in the Japanese mass media. New words and phrases are immediately accepted and repeated just like any other consumer goods. Kanehara's writing emerged in this climate, not only reflecting it, but also producing it.

The images of girls as 'cute' idols are fetishised to the extent that identifying the age group that fits the category is no longer effective in grasping their gravity. The *otaku* readers, the consumers of such images, are also spread from the first generation (born between late 1960s and 1970s) to the second generation (born after the 1980s). The term *otaku* was originally used among the middleclass housewives who identified themselves with their households. When nuclear families started to buy their ready-made house on the sub-divided block of land in the suburbs – *bunj jt aku* – in the late 1960s, the women who lived there started to call each other *otaku*, addressing themselves 'she who is her house'.[15] Kotani Mari argues that the sons of these women grew up in a close relationship with their mothers who identified themselves with their house.' The *otaku* boys, who excel in their ability to fall in love with imaginary objects, are therefore emulating their day-dreaming mothers who did not have a fulfilling reality of their own.[16] What happens to the daughters of these housebound women in the suburbs? Have they turned into the *yaoi* girls who are the consumers of the cute boy images and their erotic stories? The participants of the *otaku* debate unanimously agree that in this context gender difference is asymmetrical.[17] The girls who do not want to repeat the Mothers' life have two choices; to embody their time-frozen images as a little girl in order to get men's attention, or to live in the liminal space between such images and their own bodily actuality. I would regard Kanehara's writing (all three novels so far) as one that embodies that space. Kanehara writes from within the paradigm of post-1995 Japan

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[15] The term, therefore, also connotes the housewives' fantasy of advancing in social status by imitating *Yamanote* (upper-middle-class) women.

[16] Kotani speaks of these women with compassion from her feminist viewpoint. This skill of 'falling in love' with the imaginary reality is not viewed negatively, either. See '*Otakuiin wa otakuia no yume o mitawa*' and '*Otaku, yaoi, dobutsuka*' in *M jo genron* (2003, p. 120; pp. 175-177).

[17] See the discussion by Azuma, Saito and Kotani in 'Postmodern Otaku Sexuality' in *M j genron* (2003, pp. 131-197)

where the images of girls are fetishised in the mainstream media such as the works by Miyazaki Hayao,[18] not to mention in the less accepted but prolific pornographic *manga* culture. The protagonist 'I' in *Amebic* keeps saying, 'I am sober' and 'My head is clear', as if to make sure that she is not mistaken for the ubiquitous images of 'a girl in the text' at large. The explicit language of her bodily needs and her sexual urge is effective in confirming her existence as a real person. The liminal space between the cute little girl and the articulate individual person is the place where she lives. Her habitat is the 'room of her own' where she inscribes her stories on the surface of her computer, which is the extension of her body. In the following sections I outline the psyche of the protagonist of *Amebic*, before reading some extracts from the original Japanese texts.

Part 2. The *amoebic* girl's body and the *amoebic* body of her text

This sex which is not one

The theme of split-self in this novel is played out in two levels: the implication of multiple personalities as one and the unstable links between body and senses which are, in the psychoanalytical terms, the real and the imaginary as another. There are the first and foremost speaking agent 'I' and her alter-ego that writes *sakubun*, delusional writing, while the 'I' is not aware. In addition to the presence of these two selves, the protagonist impetuously creates another self by assuming the identity of her lover's fiancé, who is a *patissier* [パティシエ, a cake chef], whenever she is talking to a taxi driver. This act shows a darker side when she starts making elaborate cakes and deserts in the assumed role of *patissier* in her own kitchen, when there is no other person who needs convincing that she *is* the *patissier*. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the strong presence of the protagonist-double in the text, that is, novelist Kanehara Hitomi, whose profile has been widely reported in the press so much so that it is impossible for Japanese readers not to confuse the voice and the images of the protagonist with those of the author.

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[18] Kanehara Hitomi's generation of girls (born in the early 1980s) grew up with the images created by Miyazaki's major films such as *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind* (1984), *Laputa: The Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001) all of which featured young girls.

To split like this is, from another point of view, to multiply. This novel is, like 'Mr Smith' in *The Matrix*,[19] filled with multiplying selves, to the extent that the original is no longer a marker of difference or a reliable source of information. Kanehara's speaking agent – the protagonist 'I' – becomes increasingly unreliable as the gaze-holder of the text, as we read on. This unreliability is indeed the crucial performative element of this text; 'who is speaking' becomes an irrelevant question, when the multiple voices of the text come together to live in one body. As the protagonist gives her reading of the *sakubun* that appears on her desktop, she also goes into a delusional state where her own speech style converges with the voice of the author of *sakubun*. Both of their narratives go in circle, always returning to the same place without meeting the irresolvable Other (the Other that is clearly outside the orbit) that should otherwise intervene and disrupt that circuit.[20] Without this Other the speaking Self has to keep speaking to herself. No one enters the world of her own, and neither does she go outside it. The world that she lives in is a 'room of her own',[21] and her room is an extension of her body:

> The vegetable juice I vomited earlier had dried up by the floor-heating system. --- I dropped on the spot and touched the stain. It was warm, just as when it came out of my stomach. I wonder if the heated floor is part of my body. It may be tenderly looking after even the things that went out from me.[22]

She frequently wonders where her body begins and ends. 'Margins' of the body[23] – *hanamizu* [runny nose], *kushami* [sneezing], *kuso* or *unko* [excrements] – are the constant topic of *sukubun*,

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[19] In *The Matrix Reloaded* (directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003) Agent Smith in the first episode of *The Matrix*, a character played by Hugo Weaving, is now Mr. Smith who can replicate himself as a virus inside the Matrix.

[20] Refer to my discussion on *Notes from the Underground* below and footnote 34 in regards to self-referentiality of confessional modes of writing.

[21] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Penguin, 2002). In this significant feminist text Woolf convincingly argued that given a room of her own and a means of living, a woman could have achieved as much as a man had done.

[22] Op. cit., *Amebic*, p. 15. The English translations of the text in this essay are all mine.

[23] This term was originally used by anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) which later inspired Julia Kristeva to develop her theory of *abjection* in *Powers of Horror* (1982). Kanehara's writing is foregrounded by not only the images but also the sounds of the names of abject matters in confronting the aesthetic norm.

the delusional writing. She is also fascinated by the thought of getting her blood drawn out at the blood donation centre. She cannot stop talking about what come out of her body and the organs that are used in that process. The hierachised mapping of the body – for example, eyes and heart on the top, and nostrils and anus on the bottom – are in effect contested there. The delusional self describes her *inbu* [genitals], as if it had its own desire to which her brain cannot relate. While microscopic units of her body keep segmenting into more units, every unit has a say in what it wants. Only in this delusional state has she experienced orgasm, feeling her amoeba-like existences that are many inside her body. Kanehara demonstrates an analogy between the body without a central government and the text free of syntactical governance. The body she presents through her storytelling (including the previous two stories) does not represent nature or something raw that one returns to and originates from. It is instead presented as culture or a symbolic construct that takes part in re-inventing new grammar and new meanings. The cover of her second work *Ashu Beibi* [Ash Baby, 2004] is a picture from Hans Bellmer's *The Doll* (Part 2) in which the disturbing re-arrangement of woman's body-parts was his on-going pursuit of Dadaist experiments on symbolic formation. [24]

But the sober 'I' says, 'I am not amoebic, and it means I am dead, deosn't it?'[25] One *sakubun*, entitled 'Amebic', is an erotic masterpiece; the text is scattered with erotic characters that seduce the reader visually in the same way pornographic *manga* will. There is no plot involved, nor is there another body to interact with. In this *sakubun* Kanehara creates an autoerotic female *jouissance* – the pleasure without intercourse, or the pleasure without phallic mediation. The imagery that runs through the passages of *Amebic* is one that resonates strongly with Luce Irigaray's famous descriptions of female sexuality.[26]

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[24] See Kagawa Mayuki's analysis of Bellmer's works (2000). He also relates these rearranged doll's bodies to Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory and the body as machine, which has significance implications for the theme of this paper. The topic is, however, beyond the scope of this paper, and I will explore it further in my future research.

[25] Op. cit., *Ambic*, p. 49

[26] In *The Sex which is not One* (1985) Irigaray, like Cixous, revealed the myth of female (and male) sexuality constructed by phallocentrism by using the alternative image of women's autoerotic libidinal economy.

Kanehara installed in this *sakubun* one body, many voices and a self-sufficient pleasure. This polyphonic text is at the same time a two-edged sword that cuts the *carnivalesque* land of contemporary Japan. While marketing the body of her texts as sensual and pleasurable, Kanehara's voice puts in our face the sadness that her generation lives with. The sadness she describes is highly gendered; the protagonist suffers from anorexia, and as we read on, the novel begins to manifest the fact that women, who have obtained a 'room of her own' to write in, can still be held hostage there.

What goes in the body

The body of the protagonist 'I' is getting skinnier each day and is barely standing, while she drinks alcohol, and swallows dietary supplements. The delusional self continues to write regardless. She had stopped having proper meals for almost a year. She lives on a cocktail of *sapurimento*:

> For the past year I have lived by only eating supplements, pickled radish and cucumber, lollies and drinks. I know how to take these items according to the situation, but my initial approach is to try and live only on drinks. When I feel fatigued, I know I need energy and vitamins. So I take supplements of Ukon and multivitamin, and in addition, chewable tablets of a mixture of carotin and calcium. If I still feel weak, I take medicine that contains anhydrous caffeine. Occasionally, I take a supplement that contains extract of garlic and sesame, fermented soybean bacteria, and royal jelly. When my stomach feels uncomfortable, it has too much acid in it. So I have a lolly. What a satisfactory eating life I have! --- I would never ever eat things like cakes.[27]

Her hatred of food and the act of eating borders on neurosis, and for that reason, even her most legitimate critique of contemporary living comes across irrational and hysterical:

> Everyone in the restaurant was eating pasta or sandwiches. They all looked like terribly disgusting creatures. How ridiculous they are – those who eat to live! How ugly! --- Why do they put things into their mouth one after another? I would like to live on with just drinks, supplements and medicines, and occasionally gnaw at *takuwan* and cucumber pickles as I am doing now. I would never want to live by filling up my mouth with glittering meals with oily lumps, biting off living creatures' meat dripping with blood ---. Nor do I wish to fill up my mouth with cakes (or *suiitsu*, I should say now), discussing calories and cholesterol. --- How can such behaviours pass as normal? You only need a

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[27] Op. cit., *Amebic*, p. 117.

certain amount of nutrition enough to live. You shouldn't have time to indulge in leisure like 'meals'. I am so disappointed that you are fooled by the trendy idea that having meals is a fashionable act. Those who follow the trends indulge in the pleasure of meals and still keep eating without noticing the vice called 'fattening'. What fools! You should be spending more time and energy in developing yourself ---. This society that has got fatter and fatter is making a mistake. Thirty minutes at the fast-food store, one hour at the Italian restaurant, two hours at the French restaurant, and several hours of drinking and eating at the *izakaya* [a Japanese bar and restaurant], while it only takes one minute to swallow supplements. --- A fazzo, creative cooking, dieting drugs, *suiitsu*, liposuction, fast-food, slow-food – they are all the symbols of our fall. That food amongst other things should fulfill human desire. That a meal with excess is better. That is crap. I would never ever become a *Patissier*.[28]

While she does not have the vice of gluttony, she shops at the Roppongi Hills.[29] Having bought various gadgets for making cakes as a pretend-*pattissier*, she then buys a black velvet coat at the Vitton's:

This one is the sixth coat that I have bought this year. Although I asked politely to put it in a smallest bag, it turned out to be a very big bag. It will be so difficult to shop from here on! I felt depressed by that idea ---. Whenever something caught my eye, it was yet another coat; Am I a coat-fetish? Thinking that, I managed to stop my material desire. Looking at the retro coat with flowers in the corner of my eyes, I bought a pair of gloves and socks. --- Yes, the coat that I bought today is a married woman's type. I should get make-up that matches that style. Well, then, off to the make-up department.

The multiplicity of her voices demonstrates her confusion, and their often contradictory nature represents the complexity of a girl making sense of her life in the world.

Onomatopoeia

The language used in this text also exemplifies girls' recent speech trends. Their speech style is heading towards a seemingly gender-neutral arena, and yet, because of the incorporated masculine segments of their speech, it is all the more clearly marked as feminine. *Amebic* begins with the first *sakubun* that the 'I' finds on her computer one morning:

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[28] Ibid., *Amebic*, pp.36-37.

[29] A locale in central Tokyo where fashionable life styles are pursued by the urban rich.

この美しく細い身体で。華麗にそう華麗に。どうにか。こうにか。私は美しく愛をしたい。見てくださいよこの身体ほらー。細いでしょ？　もうんぬすごい曲線日でしょーこれ。———くしゃみが三発。お前お前そのくしゃみよー、脳細胞ぶちこわしちまってねーかおいという協議は置いておいて振り返る。何故かと言えばずるずるだくだくになった私の鼻を少しでもファンキーにするためにまだまだもっともっとくしゃみを出さなくてはならないという事で———ああティッシュティッシュ。鼻鼻。出てきた鼻水に向かっておまお前花粉とか含んだ粉じゃねーだろーなーって協議をしてああ入ってますと答えた鼻水を思い切り吸い込むこの快感ね。[30]

Parodying the *manga* style narrative, the *sakubun* is saturated by onomatopoeia and blunt rather masculine phrases. The use of onomatopoeia tends to imply limited verbal abilities, demonstrating immaturity, and hence, leading the act to be perceived as 'cute'. Saito Tamaki gives significance to the sound of cuteness (or childishness). He points out that rather than visual images of cute heroines in the *manga*-like media, including animation and computer games, it is the language attached to the *manga* characters that becomes the key vehicle for readers' fetishism.[31] For example, the '---- *nyo'* ending of *Dejiko'*s speech and the '---*daccha'* ending of the Sendai dialect that *Ramu-chan* used earlier in the hit animation, '*Urusei yatsura'*, and more recently, '*anta bakaa*?' '*hanyaa---n*', '*hawawa---*', '*ga, gao---*', and '*uguu---*', etc. used in popular *manga* and *anime*. Saito calls this type of language 'privileged characteristics' that stem from the structure of fetishism. A fetishised object is something that does not exist; and the power of language is to give reality to something that does not exist. While language can mask reality, it thrives in making reality out of a mask. The phrases which cute heroines habitually use 'prompt' the *otaku* readers to acknowledge their own desire to possess that cuteness as their own features. Because these cute heroines do not exist in reality, their idiosyncratic speech pattens create an illusion of a shared language and a shared reality.[32] Kanehara's texts are full of such 'privileged'

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[30] Op. cit., *Amebic*, p.3.

[31] See Saito's article in *Mj   genron* (op. cit., 2003, p. 74).

[32] Although I called it an illusion, critics of otaku such as Otsuka Eiji argue that the otaku subjects have a clear sense of virtual reality being separate from one they actually inhabit. (Otsuka, 2004; Azuma, 2001)

language, offering a code that links the writer to the reader.[33] And at the same time, she re-asserts her privilege of being a young woman who embodies such language and incites a new desire for that knowledge among the older generations. The readers including Akutagawa Prize selection panellists, are 'prompted' by Kanehara's writing to acknowledge their desire to possess the cute heroine, or even their desire to become one. Her text and the fact that *she is writing it* become the fetishised images for the *otaku* readers. Here is another passage that strongly evokes the cuteness of the voice of a *manga* girl.

———でどこまでいったかっつーとねー今私ジンをのんでるんだけどもちょっと気晴らしにビールでものもうかしらというしゃれた計らいで台所行ったんたけれども、何て言うか台所にはゆかだんぼうが入ってなくてていうか変換でゆかだんぼう出ないしね。ほんでほんでらりってアブサン持ってきたっつーのよー。しかもねー何か何か何ものかで割ろうかなんていう私の弱みにつけ込んでそこにサンッペッレッグリーノッがあったもんでそれを加えて飲み始めましたよ濁ったけどアブサン大好きー。しゅわしゅわって。しゅわしゅわってこれ。ほんで———今回転椅子をわーっと動かしてみたのね。私の気持ちとしてはもうさ、わーっと椅子にのったままがーっと私の蹴ったちからにによってばーっと後ろに流れていくだろうという計らいよいやいや今カーソルがどっかいっちゃってとんだ騒ぎよまったく私———。[34]

Furthermore, speech full of onomatopoeia implies that the speaker is not concerned about having precise communication with others. She may in fact be demonstrating that she belongs to a privileged class for whom being misunderstood does not jeopardise their wellbeing; they are of the class outside the system of material production. Adolescent Japanese girls belong to this class in the sense that they are still not expected to directly face the social in the way boys are. Kanehara depicts in this novel a young woman who proudly retains such aspects of girlhood. On this point I would like to relate this text to two other novels belonging to rather different socio-historical contexts, which, nonetheless, would help us understand the nature of Kanehara's text.

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[33] Kanehara's first novel *Hebi ni piasu* (2004) was followed by the *manga* version scripted and drawn by *manga* artist Watanabe Peko, *Hebi ni piasu: Pricking Pain Surrounds Us* (2005).

[34] Op. cit., *Amebic*, pp.4-5.

Kanashimiyo konnichiwa, Asabuki Toshiko's translation of *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) by Françoise Sagan, in 1955, mesmerised Japanese girls who had aspirations for things European. Things European or, more precisely, French-ness in this case was associated with two aspects – the protagonist's unfettered behaviour and the overarching atmosphere of *ennui* which indicated the characters' unproductive ways of living. Its seventeen-year-old-protagonist, Cecil, the girl who literally belongs to the class of leisure, constantly anticipates and visualises the end of her girlhood even in the midst of executing her adolescent power over others. She unwillingly, yet frequently, imagines what would become of her in the future. The novel is set during a summer holiday that will inevitably end, and in the closed space of a holiday resort that is away from Paris. In comparison to this, Kanehara's novel sets no limit in time or space. It takes place in an urban everyday space without a foreseeable end point, nor another place to compare that with. Whenever the protagonist of *Amebic* goes outside this space, she hurries home to it. She also considers going beyond girlhood as nothing other than her own demise.[35] Indeed, death is a sign hovering over this novel throughout. While Sagan ends her novel with Cecil saying '*kanashimiyo konnichiwa*', which indicates the girl's survival and the conclusion of her *Bildungsroman* (or coming of age) narrative, Kanehara ends hers with a delusional protagonist grumbling on, being unable to stop talking and obsessively typing into the computer.

Notes from the Apartment with Yukadanbo[36]

This inability to stop talking is a crucial point in my discussion of this text, because it is a characteristic shared by the confessional mode of writing, such as works by St. Augustine, Rousseau, Dostoevsky and Mishima.[37] Among them, the confessional narrative of Dostoevsky's Underground Man is unrivalled in its intensity and thoroughness. The profile of Kanehara's protagonist begins to emerge more clearly when I juxtapose it with the Underground Man. Living in a culturally flourishing metropolis, St. Petersburg, this depressive man lives in spite, obsessively talking about himself. He belongs to the so-called *makegumi*, the group of losers, to

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[35] She toys with the idea of being her lover's fiancé whose life represents that of a mature woman. Through her strong aversion to eating, however, she determinately refuses to become *her* (*Amebic*, pp. 121-144).

[36] *Yukadanbo* is a heated floor, which indicates *her* room is in one of the luxurious apartment blocks.

[37] Jeremy Tambling analyses the mechanisms of the confessional mode of writing in *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (1990).

use a recent addition to the Japanese vocabulary, in opposition to the *kachigumi*, the group of winners, which mainly refers to a person's career path and financial status. It should be noted that the term *makegumi* is used in a self-depreciating way by those who can laugh at themselves. By laughing at themselves, they re-establish the relationship with others on equal terms. New labels such as NEET and *otaku* also tend to be used now by people so designated for their social empowerment.[38] Unable to laugh at himself, the Underground Man is on a self-saving mission to recover his power by talking endlessly about himself. His narrative is motivated by the will to convince the reader that he is worthy, by demonstrating how thoroughly he can read his own psyche. His project is unsuccessful, for his words are self-referential, and he cannot find the end of his narrative. As if his narrative were set in a fixed orbit, it always returns to where it started. Self-referential language as such is structured in the sense that it presupposes its own meaning and precludes any possibility of shifting it.[39] His words never meet the *Other* that would disrupt their signifying system and produce new meanings. The narrator of *Amebic*, who continues her monologue still at the end of the book, is in this deadly circuit similar to that of the Underground Man.

In that sense, Kanehara's storytelling in *Amebic* is much closer to Dostoevsky's than to that of Sagan's. For the content, however, there are more similarities than differences between Kanehara and Sagan, as I pointed out above. With half a century between these two women writers we see similarities in the way they rebel against the middleclass niceties which no doubt nurtured their radicalism in the first place. Their protagonists describe themselves as excessively 'skinny' in comparison to mature women; they often detest food and those who eat in their presence. This tendency is not caused by the typical body image obsession, but rather is it to do with being different and refusing to be in line with 'full' women. It may be a part of a psychosomatic strategy to prolong their girlhood and delay their entry into adulthood. They can attract men's affection with their childlike body, while also tapping into the desire of women readers who cannot simulate such a relationship in reality. The protagonists of both texts enjoy their power. These girls smoke, drink and have sex in a matter-of-fact manner. They retain a safe distance even in describing their most painful experiences, in the same way that American hardboiled detectives, for example, do in their narration. The coolness of their narratives is a type of snobbism, and their arrogance ironically attracts readers.

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[38] See the discussion on NEET in *Yuriika* (Eureka: 51).

[39] See Tambling (op. cit., 1990).

Part 3. A feminist proposition (summary)

The initial role of onomatopoeia in *manga* is to compliment visual images with sound-effects. In Kanehara's case onomatopoeia is often attached to *abjection*, the *grotesque* of the body.[40] So far in all her three novels, she does not hold back in describing the indescribable – about bodily functions and sexual relations. She thrives in using anti-social themes and vocabulary; this taboo-busting approach of hers has been ironically welcomed by the literary establishment, mostly older male writers of her father's generation. It would be wrong to think that the liberation from taboo and the daring of Kanehara's writing come about in isolation. The masses of young women, who, in the 1980s and the 1990s, phenomenally assumed the role of a rich girl – *ojs ama* – or a 'princess in waiting' for a good marriage,[41] are now becoming blunter in the way they speak; saying the unsayable seems to be more than acceptable in the *carnivalesque*[42] social spheres of the past decade. Girls and young women enjoy a new power to shock older men, and enjoy their new image that is mysteriously 'cute' in appearance, 'strong' in opinion and 'knowledgeable' in their own sexual desire. When the ordinary space turns *carnivalesque*, as it has in contemporary Japan, there is no need of a designated space in which disorder is sanctioned; taboo words are tolerated; and authority can be temporarily undermined. One only needs to turn on the Japanese TV to see this phenomenon, where every event is a festivity and every moment is a farce played by ordinary people, not just a designated few. As a result, the space of literature, and art in general, which provided this space of human festivity, or *renaissance* if you like, looses its significance. Kanehara published her first novel, in January 2004, *Assyu beibii* in April the same year and *Amebic* in May 2005. Later that year Karatani Kojin called his essay collection the 'end of modern literature'. He argues that literature (in the modernist sense of it, and therefore modern novels in particular) was once a galvanising force in setting the direction of critical thinking as well as being itself a body of critiques. Thinkers, in France and Japan for example, were strongly affected by the modern novels that they read. The identity of a novelist and that of a critic was interchangeable. The discourse used in literary criticism was also strongly connected to political

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[40] See Kristeva (op. cit., 1982).

[41] They were also called '*brikko'* which was promoted by the publishing sector (Otsuka, 2004, p. 20)

[42] For the definition of the *carnivalesque*, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1985).

discourses. Now, on the other hand, it is no longer capable of offering praxis.[43] Karatani's renunciation of literary criticism cannot be dismissed as his personal departure. In one sense we all have already departed from the paradigm of modern literature and arrived at something innately short-circuiting. The so-called postmodern narratives which celebrate multiplicity, polyphony and irony communicate their messages in a disguised form – disengaged and distanced. If the form also determines the content, and not simply the other way round as we tend to think, their messages do not sound coherent. I have demonstrated in this essay, however, Kanehara's seemingly incoherent narratives are still resourceful for a feminist critique. Karatani is right in saying that literature, the modern novel in particular, which was the key player in modern thought, critical thinking and social theory, no longer contribute as they once did to the ways we see and think on the grander scale. I do stand with him in dismissing the works of those contemporary writers and critics who write without being aware of the political effect of their writing. Japan's excessively inwardly gaze in the past two decades is often discouraging for those who look globally and historically in their critical thought. The text of *Amebic* is written by a young woman who grew up in the post-1995 paradigm of Tokyo, in which *m j   genron* [net-discourse, coined by Azuma Hiroki in his website discussion in 2000] provides the dominant discourse and imagery for young people. While dwelling in the story of the 'I', *Amebic* also tells stories of this 'present world' that many of us are struggling to grasp. Kanehara's critique of the present world is imbedded in her stories. She is writing from within the present world and not from a distance. It is not enough to say that Kanehara's texts reflect the reality. Rather, it is the likes of this text that constitute the cultures of present Japan. Furthermore, this text puts forward a suffering that is deeply gendered; the sober 'I' of the protagonist talks of a physical anxiety that she felt as a young girl when a man adjusted the hem of her skirt.[44] Although the memory of it cannot be counted as the Trauma that causes her present suffering, it is the gendered memory that most girls share. The fact that the protagonist cannot acknowledge her desire to possess her man (she cannot say she wants him) has a connection to the incomprehensible and therefore almost hysterical speech of her alter-ego, the writer of *sakubun*. Although the protagonist of *Amebic* has come all the way to own a comfortable room of her own and possesses the power of language, she still exhibits the unresolved in-between status of a subaltern, who is not quite the same as a man. Her

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[43] He cites an Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy, who after receiving the British Booker Prize in 1997, stopped writing novels, saying why write a novel when there are other urgent matters to work on.

[44] Op. cit., *Amebic*, pp. 10-11.

speech is *improper*, since she cannot spontaneously access the subject position per se. While the subject proper would reappropriate the other in his realm and imagine himself as a solid entity, she imagines herself to be many, and each of her speaks in a different language. As Takemura Kazuko feels the need to reiterate the nature of a subaltern in her recent book, *Feminism* (2005), it is still necessary to read the trace of phallogocentrism that appears in the surface of the body of women (and girls). How much we read in them depends on our ability to read and the stance we take in writing our critiques. Despite Karatani, I believe that there are a plenty of tasks yet to be performed by feminist literary critics. The blurb of *Amebic* goes: *Acrobatic Me-ism Eats Away the Brain, It Causes Imagination Catastrophe.* If someone misreads 'the' brain as 'her' brain, the sentence loses control and starts to sell the image of a hysterical woman and her *abject* body. More feminist critiques are yet to be written.[45]

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