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# *Kerwan*

International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies

23/2

2019

## Table of Contents

### Articles

The Terms for “Emotion” in Swahili: A Lexical Analysis Based on Interviews with Native Speakers <i>Rosanna Tramutoli</i>	7
Identity and Memory in Swahili War Verses: The Long Road to an East African <i>Self</i> <i>Graziella Acquaviva</i>	29
Poesia swahili in Katanga: multilinguismo e corporalità nei versi di Patrick Mudekereza <i>Flavia Aiello e Roberto Gaudioso</i>	49
Face to Face with the Natural Environment: A Look at African Literature <i>Graziella Acquaviva and Cecilia Mignanti</i>	75
Political Clientelism, Political Culture and Development in Africa <i>Jonathan K. Oyedeji, O. Ige Alhassan, Austin Ayodele, and O. Akinniyi Ogunrinde</i>	97
Depicting the Others: Late Bronze Age Southern Levant’s Cultural Identity and Adornment from the Egyptian View – Reality vs. Perception <i>Giulia Tucci</i>	117
Language Reform by Lebanese Lexicographers in the <i>Nahḍa</i> : The Case of Sa’id al-Ḥūrī aš-Šartūnī <i>Stefania Porcu</i>	131

Les enjeux de la traduction arabe des antithèses dans la presse française	159
<i>Adnan Smadi et Shereen Kakish</i>	
<i>Bhakti, dharmā e vairāgya nell'agiografia di Pīpā</i>	175
<i>Pinuccia Caracchi</i>	
Variations of the <i>Yamauba</i> Figure in <i>Murakumo no Mura no Monogatari</i> (1987)	209
by Saegusa Kazuko	
<i>Daniela Moro</i>	
Terms of Address in the Pubian Dialect of Lampung (Indonesia)	237
<i>Iing Sunarti, Sumarti, Bambang Riadi, and Gede Eka Putrawan</i>	

## Reviews

Horst Beinlich (Hrsg.). <i>9. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung, Kultabbildung und Kultrealität. Hamburg, 27. September-1. Oktober 2011</i> (2013)	267
<i>Stefan Bojowald</i>	
Tony K. Stewart. <i>Witness to Marvels. Sufism and Literary Imagination</i> (2019)	273
<i>Ewa A. Łukaszyk</i>	

## Variations of the *yamauba* Figure in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* (1987) by Saegusa Kazuko

Daniela Moro

This paper analyzes the variations of the archetype of the 山姥 *yamauba*, or mountain witch, emerging in the work 『群ら雲の村の物語』 *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* (Story of the Village of the Clouds) by Saegusa Kazuko. The article reflects on the philosophical insight which this work brings, through a close study of the particular structure, characters and setting. In order to show how Saegusa's work foreshadowed contemporary currents such as posthuman feminism, I will try to reread this work together with other novels and essays by the same writer by focusing on the significance of the figure of *yamauba* as the embodiment of a critique of anthropocentrism.

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As it is well known, the figure of the *yamauba* has undergone various changes in the Japanese tradition, and it is very complex to retrace the history of the *yamauba*'s variations, since scholars offer different interpretations of it.

Furthermore, the *topos* of the *yamauba* in Japanese women's literature has been already studied extensively. Before the latest 『現代女性文学を読む。山姥たちの物語』 *Gendai josei bungaku wo yomu. Yamanbatachi no monogatari* ("Reading Contemporary Women's Literature. Tales of Yamanba"), which analyzes postwar women writers' works from a broader standpoint, using the keyword "yamauba" as an ideal of woman who lives beyond the stereotype of femininity in Japanese society (Mizuta 2017: 12), 『女性の原型と語りなおし。山姥たちの物語』 *Josei no genkei to katarinaoshi. Yamanbatachi no monogatari* (Women's Prototypes and Retelling. Tales of Yamanba, Mizuta *et al.* 2002) is the most important study on women's works making use of the *topos* of *yamauba* in their

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<sup>1</sup> This article represents the outcome of my research on the image of the *yamauba* in postwar women's literature and it is part of a bigger project by the National Institute for Japanese Literature in Tokyo entitled: "The Body in Traditional Performative Arts. What Emerges from Words and Visual Arts" 「古典芸能における身体—ことばと絵画から立ち上がるもの—」. Most of the documents used to write this article were gathered during a period of research conducted in January 2019 in Tokyo and funded by the NIJL.

narrations.<sup>2</sup> As the editor Mizuta Noriko shows (2002: 26), there are many female writers also in Europe who have interpreted witch-like historical characters as figures of resistance to patriarchal society and she collects examples of analogue uses of the *yamauba* made in Japanese literature.

For the above reasons, here I do not aim to discuss the origins of the *yamauba* figure, which have been extensively researched by many scholars such as Meera Viswanathan (2002) and Baba Akiko (1988), nor do I hope to subvert the results of previous seminal works on the rewriting of the *yamauba* figure in postwar Japanese female literature. Rather, I aim to add some new insights to the vast panorama already described by Mizuta and other scholars (Mizuta *et al.* 2002, 2017) and hopefully to broaden the perspective on the figure of the *yamauba*, until now limited to embody a prototype of woman free from the boundaries of society.

In this study I will focus on Saegusa Kazuko's work *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* (Story of the Village of the Clouds), published in 1987. In my view, the archetype of the *yamauba* emerging in this work does not merely embody resistance against stereotypes and the categorization of women's role in society, something which – as postulated by Mizuta – is common in many works by female writers using this *topos* (2002: 37). In particular, as we shall see, in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* the image of the *yamauba* is neither female nor male, overcoming not only the boundary between genders, but also between human and non-human. In its many variations coming to the fore in Saegusa's work, the image of the *yamauba* can be seen as the embodiment of a profound philosophical reflection by the author. Her effort to create a “women's philosophy” (Saegusa [1984] 2013c) through her literature – a philosophy which can easily be considered essentialist if interpreted superficially – is of great theoretical value even today. I believe that this concept plays an important role in the development of a system of thought alternative to patriarchal schemes, which Saegusa studied and created through her works. This is why I think that it is necessary to analyze this and other few works by Saegusa from a different perspective than the work of Mizuta and the others.

By examining the intertextuality with traditional performing arts and classics and by considering Saegusa's essays and some other literary works, I aim to illustrate how her work, through its insights into philosophical and Buddhist conceptions, foreshadows in a way certain stances which may be taken for granted today, but which at the time were not common. By analyzing the particular narrative structure and the characteristic environment of the village in which the work is set through the lenses of posthuman feminism, I would like to explore how *Murakumo no mura no*

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<sup>2</sup> As explained in Viswanathan's article (2002: 147), the same term 山姥, is read “yamauba” if generally referring to folklore, and “yamanba” in the case of the *nō* play.

*monogatari* lends a particular nuance to the archetype of the *yamauba* which will be at the center of some later works.

## 2. Saegusa's typical themes and style

Critics generally tend to divide Saegusa's works into two phases: the existentialist phase, where she writes to reflect on the precariousness of human existence, and the post-1980s phase, where the influence of her reading of Buddhist texts can be strongly perceived (Fairbanks 2002: 326; Kurata 2016: 151). Apart from this distinction, there is a pattern that Saegusa uses frequently in her works. By explicitly dealing with sensitive topics, she simultaneously reveals various aspects of a given phenomenon (for instance, a criminal act such as murder or rape) and ends provocatively without aiming to provide a fair or ethically acceptable conclusion. However, it could be stated that through the insertion of quotations from *nō* or classics, this directness is softened and the reflection on the sensitive topic acquires a deeper meaning. One theme which is often explored in Saegusa's works is the act of giving birth as strictly interconnected with death, by repeatedly dealing with phenomena like abortion, miscarriage, child abandonment and the killing of one's child.

Yonaha Keiko (2014: 160) points out that in a 1980 collection inspired by *nō*, 『野守の鏡』 *Nomori no kagami* (The Mirror of Nomori), Saegusa uses the image of the chain of Möbius to create a set of short stories which are intertwined but can be read separately. I would argue that this idea lies at the basis of the structure of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* as well. In this work, apparently focused on a main text with a prologue and epilogue, the length of the three parts is different, but it is not easy to identify the elements which link them: these actually are three different stories with different characters, even though in Saegusa's intention they might display what she calls 同一人物 *dōitsujinbutsu* "the same personality" (Tamashiro *et al.* 1985: 41).

Quoting the afterword to 『珈琲館木曜社』 *Kōhikan mokuyōsha* (Kohikan, Thursday Company, 1973), Yonaha explains that for Saegusa this work represented an experimental effort by which, instead of founding the story on the flowing of time or on the description of "one life" or "one story," she sought to base the narrative on the "expansion of space" by focusing on "one concept" or "one world" (Yonaha 2014: 161). Yonaha goes on to explain that this is the reason why in *Kōhikan mokuyōsha* we do not find a protagonist, but rather many different details that appear such as persons, landscapes and things, creating the "expansion of space" (Yonaha 2014: 161). In the case of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, written fifteen years later, I would argue that this kind of fragmented narrative has been accomplished through the image of the *yamauba*, as a concept linking

the epilogue, the main text and the prologue and giving a direction to the main story, which has little coherence in terms of time, space and subject.

Apart from the frequent references to the *yamauba*, in my reading there are only two other things which give continuity to the stories in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*. The first is the setting (an unnamed village near the mountains), even if, owing to frequent time lapses and shifting point of view, the mountain sometimes represents a different space, a second dimension which brings the characters in contact with the otherworld. The second element is the insistence on the death of the weaker as a necessary sacrifice for the stronger to continue living. In relation to weak beings we always find the analogy between little animals and little humans, whose lives are sacrificed.

As for the peculiar structure of the work, to explain it better I must briefly introduce the writer's philosophy, which is reflected in her writing. After reading one of the major Buddhist texts at the beginning of the 1980s, 『大乘起信論』 *Daijōkishinron* (Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna), with her husband (Saegusa [1983] 2013b: 154), a Buddhist monk, Saegusa started inserting in her literature a deep reflection on many themes linked to the Buddhist conception of the world. In a long interview with four different scholars (Tamashiro *et al.* 1985: 136), Saegusa states that her aim is to create a world where there are no fixed time and place – analogous to a dream *nō* for Yonaha (2014: 152) – and where time behaves “spatially,” like a place where you can go back and forth. In this “place” living beings and dead ones, life and death, coexist, being merely temporary states. “When I say ‘spatial’ I mean that that there is something like a big mass of life and when it takes a form, that is life. When it sinks, that is death” (Tamashiro *et al.* 1985: 136). In other words, if some being comes to life it means that it just took a specific form (animal, human, plant), but it is part of the same flow to which all other beings belong as well. In this Buddhist “eternal now,” there are no fixed boundaries between “me” and “the other,” since the subject and the object are part of a bigger continuum and therefore there is no real difference between animal or human. This provocative stance, often displayed by the writer and obviously directly drawn from Buddhist thought, ultimately represents a challenge to the “modern self” at the center of modern Japanese (male) literature, as argued by Yonaha (2014: 130).

Another feature of Saegusa's writing emphasized by Yonaha (2014: 141) – a feature that probably does not seem so innovative nowadays, but which was certainly experimental at the time –, is the mixture of genres. The 1980 work 『思いがけず風の蝶』 *Omoigakezu kaze no chō* (Unexpected Wind Butterfly) is a hybrid novel, constituting an important reflection on the writing process. I will quote here the words uttered by the protagonist after watching the *shite* (main actor) of *nō Teika*, since they summarize the role of *nō* as a source of inspiration for the writer, as the one place where the loss of self *à la* Saegusa occurs:



Every moment I follow the figure [of Princess Shikishi] which at times disappears and at other times floats from a place with no forms, and in so doing I create my characters. I try to catch it as clearly as possible, but I sometimes lose sight of it, or get confused. And so, at a certain moment, suddenly, I realize that it was nothing but my own shadow. It is impossible to catch the source of light, but by catching my own shadow, I realize that it is a hint at the light and that this is why my own shadow, which is to say the characters, must be created by alluding to the light. Probably I am jumping around, but I also think that with this figure I confirm my own identity, or better, that my own identity is confirmed by it (Saegusa 1980a:124).<sup>3</sup>

Yonaha argues that, in this particular world created by Saegusa, reality and fantasy or dream are not distinguished, and living creatures coexist with dead ones, again as in a *nō* of dream (2014: 159) – considered a form of science fiction – or in magical realism (Yonaha 2007: 732). In *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* we find all the above features very distinctly.

### 3. *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*: structure and main events

#### 3.1. General structure

Having introduced some general aspects of Saegusa's works, I will now illustrate the complex structure of the work *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*. The richness of this novel obliges me to explain some parts of the main plot in detail in order to then be able – in the second part of the paper – to refer to certain episodes that help clarify my reading of the work.

The novel is made up of three seemingly independent short stories with separate titles, which in some points may be seen to intertwine: the prologue 「桜能」 *Sakura nō* (The *Nō* of Cherry Trees), the main text bearing the same title as the overall work (*Murakumo no mura no monogatari*), and the epilogue 「逆髪」 *Sakagami* (Reverse Hair), named after the main role in the *nō* 『蟬丸』 *Semimaru*. As shown by the title, the shorter stories at the beginning and at the end directly report some scenes from two *nō* dramas: *Yamauba* and *Semimaru*, both set in the mountains like Saegusa's own work.

#### 3.2. Prologue: *Sakura nō*

The prologue comprises four intertwined stories: two stories set in the mountains and two episodes taken from the 『今昔物語集』 *Konjaku monogatari shū* (The Tales of Times Now Past) and linked to the *yamauba*. At first, the narrative describes a mountain village where cherry petals similar to snow

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<sup>3</sup>All the translations from Japanese are mine unless otherwise specified.

suddenly start falling down and the whole village becomes like a *nō* stage, as suggested in the title. Three young women make their appearance as sightseers. They watch a performance of the *nō Yamanba*. It is not clear whether this is a hallucination or whether the play is really being performed. Suddenly it gets dark, and the tourists realize that they have seen the figure of the real *yamauba*. At this point, it is implied that they have entered another world or dimension, where the *yamauba*'s spirit is present and the story ends vaguely, without any definite conclusion.

Another story is intertwined with this one, where an unnamed male and his female mistress appear and try to bury a baby's body in the mountain. The woman blames the man for killing the baby and feigning it was an accident. He denies the accusation, but she suddenly disappears. When she returns, the baby's corpse is gone, and her face and voice are transformed into those of the mountain witch, the *yamauba*. She confesses to the man that she ate the corpse because she thought that this was the best solution and that he would be happy about it. The man runs away, and goes back home, where he had left his parents, an elderly father and a supposedly bedridden mother. There he finds them lamenting that they had been waiting for him for months and starving, while in his mind he had been away only for one day. His pregnant wife is said to have fled, but it is suggested by the narrative that his parents had no food to eat and decided to kill her and eat both her and the baby in her belly. The mother's face too is transformed into a *yamauba*'s one, and she flees to the mountains.

Furthermore, in this part there is a reference to two episodes of the *Konjaku monogatari shū* (Japanese section), namely the 22<sup>th</sup> tale of chapter 27 and the 25<sup>th</sup> tale of chapter 29. In the former we find two brothers out on a hunt. When a creature threatens to attack one of the two brothers, the other shoots it down with his bow, after which the two siblings run home. There they find their old mother in bed wounded by an arrow, so they immediately realize that at the night she changes into a monstrous creature and kill her. The moral of the story is that "once they become old mothers, all change into monsters and try to eat their children."

The second *Konjaku* story is about a 10<sup>th</sup>-century samurai, Taira no Sadamori. He is sick and a physician tells him that the only way for him to get better is to eat the liver of a small male fetus. He is ready to sacrifice his unborn nephew, but the father of the child asks the physician to tell Sadamori that a fetus linked to him by blood is not going to cure him. So the nephew is saved, but a lot of female fetuses are sacrificed before the samurai gets hold of another male one. Just after this story, Saegusa adds a comment underlining that in the *Konjaku monogatari* there is no mention of what happened after death to the many spirits of the pregnant women and their female fetuses killed by Sadamori.

### 3.3. The main text: *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*

The setting of the main text of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* is again a village near the mountains. The main character is a man in his forties named Ryō whose mother was killed during a bomb raid just after giving birth to him. Ryō's older sister tells him that after birth he was suckling from his dead mother's breast, and refers to the story of Izanagi and Izanami in 『古事記』 *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters). Similarly to Izanami, who has partaken of food cooked in the otherworld and therefore cannot come back to the world of the living, Ryō has drunk milk from the 黄泉の国 *Yomi no kuni*, the land of dead, and throughout the story he is considered by his sister a creature half belonging to the otherworld. After that, he is raised by a woman already over the age of sixty who is not a blood relative but is referred to as ばあさん *bāsan*, "grandma."

Even if the narrative is in third person, the reader may get the impression that Ryō is the protagonist. But, as anticipated, this work is designed not to have a protagonist. The point of view frequently shifts, not giving the reader any certainty as to the identity of the speaker. The only difference the narrative introduces is the use of the dialect (of the prefecture of Hyōgo) for old inhabitants of the village. The novel starts precisely with a narrator speaking in dialect. It is the voice of some old person (probably not a specific one, but a choral voice as an embodiment of the spirit of the village) who is speaking from the otherworld. The voice introduces the feelings of someone who dies and perceives him/herself going back to a dark and comfortable place, to her mother's womb. Then a second first person narrator starts narrating – in standard Japanese – her incident and how she died and "awoke," seeing a little child sucking her immobile breasts. She died soon after giving birth, so we can easily detect the analogy with Ryō's mother, even if the circumstances of their deaths are different. She asks the other voice where she is and it replies: "*Yomi no kuni*". After that, the focus is on this world and there is a description of Ryō's travelling to a village near the mountains to attend the funeral of this *bāsan*, dead at 103. Even if after that the novel recounts facts of this world related to the funeral, Ryō, because of his half belonging to the otherworld, can often hear voices, especially that of his grandmother. The latter speaks in the first person in dialect, creating a mixture of past and present, reality and fantasy, life and death typical of Saegusa's style, as explained above.

During the wake we hear stories about the grandmother's life and we get to know that she had many children. Two of them died in war, while the last boy was drowned by her. The family was living in severe poverty at the time and, being in her forties, the woman felt ashamed to face another pregnancy. It is clear from the narrative that she always regretted having sacrificed her baby and that she also felt in debt to her other sons, who died in the war, allowing her to receive a pension.

When Ryō was born, the grandmother believed that the soul of the child she had drowned had come back into our world by entering Ryō's body. She thus decided to take care of him after his mother's death, in order to expiate her guilt. So, even though there are many other members of the family around, it is his name alone that she calls out just before dying. In the narrative there is another tale of death which almost mirrors this one. A group of 70-year-old grandfathers, who had met many years before and agreed to die together, come to the mountains to commit suicide. It is a group of men who want to die because of their sense of guilt towards the soldiers who perished in the war and their feeling that they are unnecessary to society after retirement. The story of the abandoning of the weakest as a step necessary in order for the stronger to survive that emerges with the account of the grandmother's life narrative becomes intertwined with the self-perception of weakness and self-annihilation of men who used to be at the center of society but lost this place with old age.

Here the realistic part ends and the dreamlike one begins, which will run on until the end. Ryō is following the old men up the mountains, and he suddenly feels that his body, completely surrounded by clouds, is becoming a cloud itself, ultimately merging with the mountain and becoming one with nature. Afterwards, he meets a dog about to be eaten by crows and does not help it, but starts feeling as though his own body were being eaten by crows – as though the dog were inside him. On the mountain top he watches the old men commit suicide and hears them speaking together, although at the same time he can distinguish every single voice. After that, his grandmother's voice calls him to accompany her on the 中陰 *chūin*, the road to the realm of death, as she always expected him to do while still alive. This time his appearance and voice are those he used to have in his youth, and he finds himself wearing a schoolbag over his funeral suit. Along the way the two of them not only meet the man's mother, but see the kittens which the grandmother had sacrificed while still alive by abandoning them – an act for which she always felt guilty. Ryō can also speak with his sister, who is alive, but he cannot see her, so this suggests that by now he is probably unable to come back from the otherworld, just as Izanami. The story ends ambiguously with Ryō feeling his body inside his grandmother's voice.

### 3.4. Epilogue: *Sakagami*

The beginning of the epilogue, exactly like the previous two sections, has a dreamlike quality to it. The beginning, where the narrator describes the voice of a youth in the mountains which is difficult to understand, reminds us of the main story as well, since there is a focus on the voice as a sign of the presence of the otherworld in this world. In this story we have a reference to the *nō* play *Semimaru*,

where the blind son of a nobleman is exiled into the mountains. The main character too, his sister Sakagami, cannot have a respectable position in society because of her strange hair, which points towards the sky and literally drives her mad. She joins him in the mountains, and they share tears, only to part again to find their respective paths.

At first the narrative presents this voice spreading across the mountains, and talking about the sadness of abandoned kittens, poppies or children, who cannot reach Buddhahood. Then the story begins with two middle-aged sisters watching the *nō Yamanba* come to life in a bloom of snow-like cherry petals, on a stage which cannot be distinct from the mountains – again an ambiguous setting that is half-dream and half-reality. It is probably the same performance we find in the prologue. Indeed, even in this case the characters realize that when the performance starts every spectator suddenly disappears, again making the reader suspect that the *nō* leads the characters into another dimension, as in the prologue. This reference also makes it possible to read the whole work as one in which time has stopped and all the stories occur at the same time. After *Yamanba* comes *Semimaru* and the sisters are moved by the sadness of this story of 子捨て *kosute*, “child abandonment” (Saegusa 1987: 177). They are touched by the play because it reminds them of their own brother. The sisters and their small brother had a difficult youth, growing up with their father and stepmother in a mountain village where they did not belong and were not happy. The little brother was sick and died at the age of fourteen, after spending four years alone in hospital – a prospect he preferred to that of going back to his father’s house. The story focuses on the elder sister, a non-married woman who is still mourning her little brother after thirty-three years, feeling pity for him but also for herself because of her solitude. Short tempered and ill-mannered, she is sometimes considered “mad” by people. She used to be a teacher and when they would call her ババア *babaa* or “old granny,” she would get so angry as to dream of killing her students with a knife. So, at the early age of fifty-five she decided to quit her job suddenly. She has a non-conventional way of seeing society, and this is probably why she never married or had children. But she truly loved her little brother. Nevertheless, after seeing him lie in hospital throughout his sickness, she makes a toast to his death, as she feels relieved by the fact that he has stopped suffering.

After watching *Semimaru*, the woman decides to go and dig up the remains of her brother and mother’s urns and to bury them again away from their father’s tomb. But when she starts digging, she realizes that she cannot find them. The voice – probably that of the woman’s brother – lamenting abandonment in the mountain is heard again. When the younger sister looks at her to try to convince her to stop digging, she sees that her “mad” sister’s hair is growing towards the sky, as with the madwoman in *Semimaru*, and feels that she will never make her way back from the tomb.

#### 4. The space and time of the *mura*

As becomes clear already from the title, the setting of the 村 *mura*, “village,” is preponderant and it links the three parts, as already anticipated. Yonaha (2014: 158), suggests that the function of the *mura* in Saegusa’s writings from a certain period is to embody the constrictions and obligations due to the community’s rules and fear of hearsay. In the village, more than in the city, the existentialist doubt is strengthened by the feeling of not having a “way out” (Yonaha 2007: 730), as clearly emerges from the story of the sisters’ youth in the epilogue of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*. Old people live long and the young often die, as a metaphor of the disintegration of the community based on patriarchal principles (Yonaha 2014: 157). Nevertheless, while Saegusa continued to problematize the idea of the community as a constraint for the individual, once her works started acquiring more Buddhist overtones, the village also came to be described as a place where individuals become blurred with one another (Yonaha 2014: 158) and the conception of time is relative, as the story of Ryō and her grandmother shows. Here, in the same space, the living and the dead, past, present and future coexist almost without distinction (Yonaha 2014: 152). With young and old people living together, age distinctions are lost because time is vanquished by the old people’s perception. To put it in the words of Ryō’s grandmother: “people’s soul when they are dead begins a long long journey. Compared to that journey, a hundred years, one year or twenty-thirty years are merely an instant” (Saegusa 1987: 171).

In the idea of the village as the setting for magic realism par excellence, one important aspect is the voice, which, as suggested before, has a very focal role throughout the narrative. In particular, the voices often heard in the mountains are clearly the voices of dead people whose body is not visible. They are frequently multiple and coexist with the voices of living people, especially in Ryō’s mind, who, as underlined in many passages, is already half living, half dead, because he has suckled from his dead mother’s breast. Also in the scene of the group suicide of the old men, Ryō perceives all their voices together yet at the same time distinctly, exactly as in a *nō* performance, when main actor *shite* and the chorus chant the same lines. In that scene he looks at them and they all seem to have the same face (Saegusa 1987: 146).

#### 5. *Yamauba* variations and *josei genri*

One could say that the message of this novel is encapsulated by the following sentence, uttered by Ryo’s grandmother: “The ones who survive, survive thanks to the dead” (Saegusa 1987: 116). Whether

children or old people, the key idea here is that people (or beings) who are weak or sick and represent a burden to the family must be sacrificed, no matter how painful this might be. As already anticipated, this work is clearly representative of Saegusa's use of sensitive themes to explore different points of view. Indeed, the recurrence of scenes in which weak beings are sacrificed is evident. The victims are not only human beings, but also kittens and puppies. Indeed, the grandmother must thank her two dead children for her pension, as well as the little fetus she aborted in the water. Likewise, Ryō must thank his mother for protecting him from bombs at the cost of her own life.

The prologue presents a controversial idea of sacrifice, which is even more problematic from an ethical point of view. Two women eating fetuses appear. While at least one of these fetuses has already died when the *yamauba*-mother eats it, another one is killed and eaten by its grandfather and grandmother to survive. This story is evidently analogous to both the tales quoted from *Konjaku monogatari*. In both cases, we find elderly people who in order to go on living must eat their younger relatives (a son or nephew). These rather extreme stories are probably presented at the beginning in order to prevent the reader from taking any moral judgement for granted, and to provocatively introduce the other act of abandonment, which mirrors the act perpetrated by the elderly on children for the sake of survival: the abandonment of the elderly by their own children.

Indeed, at the end of the main text, the theme of 姨捨 *obasute* is presented. *Obasute* is another legend about old women in the mountains, but we could say that even though some critics consider the *yamauba* and *obasute* to come from the same source and to be essentially related (Komatsu 2000: 432), they are actually perceived as being quite different: one devours (or is accused of devouring) people, especially children, while the other is abandoned in the mountains, left there by her son to die of hunger. The perpetrator and the victim in this work are linked and their difference relativized to the point of potentially offending the sensitivity of the reader, as is typical of Saegusa's works.

In this study, I consider the figure of Ryō's grandmother as one that combines life and death, similarly to the figure of the Great Mother. Acclaimed Jungian psychologist Kawai Hayao in 『昔話と日本人の心』 *Mukashibanashi to nihonjin no kokoro* (Old Tales and The Japanese Mind, [1982] trad. 1996) explains the double spirit of the *yamauba* by using the archetype of the Great Mother postulated by Erich Neumann. Like the Great Mother, the *yamauba* has the power to destroy as well as to create, and she is a source of death precisely because she is a source of life. Kawai (1996: 33) writes: "This figure, from whom everything is born and to whom everything returns when it dies, is a container in

which the process of death and rebirth occurs. She is especially important to agricultural peoples, becoming the object of worship quite naturally.”<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the main text of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, the choral voice embodying the spirit of the village explains how the place where it is now, the entrance to the long road to the *Yomi no kuni*, is the same as the uterus (Saegusa 1987: 37). “We all go back to our mother’s womb. That is called the journey after death.” This key sentence clearly links life and death, connecting the *yamauba*, the main *topos* of the whole work, and the Great Mother. Moreover, the grandmother who is talking is also clearly another variation of the *yamauba*/Great Mother, giving birth to many children but then sacrificing one to save the others.

As I mentioned at the beginning, by dealing with sensitive topics from various perspectives, morals and common sense are completely deconstructed in Saegusa's work. After shocking the reader in the prologue with a description of *yamaubas* eating fetuses, i.e. women transformed into demons, in the main text the author presents a *yamauba*-like figure that, being connected to archetype of the Great Mother, emerges as more than just a perpetrator, no matter how cruel her action might be.

With regard to the dramaturgy of *nō Yamanba*, theatre expert Watanabe Tamotsu writes:

It is said that *yamanba* was originally created by the spirit of the mountain, the sound of the mountain and the dust of the mountain together. Therefore, she can become a demon and take the appearance of a demon, but it is only a temporary figure, and it can change into many different forms. Moreover, the changing figure itself is temporary and her real substance is just like air (1995: 251-2).<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, in the *nō* play it is not clear if the *yamauba* is a woman or a demon, as noted by Baba Akiko (1988: 281-7). What is clear is that in what she calls “the *yamanba* philosophy” her identity is blurred and she is integrated with nature, becoming one with it while roaming the mountains (Baba 1988: 282).

In the play *Yamanba* we often find the image of clouds, which also occurs in Saegusa’s work, as suggested by the very title. In the play, the *yamanba*’s own self is also compared to 妄想の雲 *mōsō no*

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<sup>4</sup> 「すべてのものがそれから生まれ、死んだ後はそこへと帰り、死と在生の過程が生じる場としてののは、民族にとっては特に重要なものであり、宗教的崇拝の対象となったのも当然のことである。」 (Kawai 1982: 50)

<sup>5</sup> 「山姥は、自分は本来山の精であり、山の音、山の塵(ちり)があつまってきたという。いまは鬼女となって姿をあらわしたけれども、それは仮の姿であり、いろいろな姿に変化する。しかし変化するのもまた仮りの姿であって、実態は空気のようなものである」



*kumo*, the clouds of illusion. The verse reads: “With shifting form, like drifting clouds,/ temporarily transforming self,/ by attachment transfigured, a she-demon/ appears before our eyes, but,/ when good and evil are seen as one,/ form as void as it is, then...” (Bethe, Brazell 1978: 109). *Yamauba* is indeed a very unmaterial being, and – as underlined by the two sisters in the epilogue, where they state that “the *yamauba* never dies” – she never ceases to exist, but only changes form. This detail is very important, since it reminds us of the blurred existence of *Ryō*, initially considered human, but then transforming into clouds and after that continuously changing his appearance until he follows the grandmother on her way to the realm of death.

In the play *Yamanba*, there is also a quotation of a famous verse from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (般若經 *Han'nyakyō*), called 色即是空 *shikisoku zekkū* (lit. “What exists in material form is devoid of substantiality”). The play continues: “Buddhism equals wordliness,/ passions imply enlightenment,/ buddhas, living creatures,/ living creatures, *Yamanba*” (Bethe, Brazell 1978: 50). This underlines how in Buddhist philosophy the *yamauba* has a fleeting essence, in unity with all living creatures. So, even if the *yamauba* takes very different forms in the Japanese imagination, the *yamanba* emerging from *nō* stands out for its indistinct self and unity with nature, combined with perpetual change.

In Kawai's theory (Kawai 1996: 34) the Great Mother too has a close relationship with the concept of change: “The transformation in connection with motherhood has a strong tie to the body as is shown in eating, in conception, and in giving birth.”<sup>6</sup>

Neumann's concept of matriarchal consciousness, linked to cycles of nature and passivity, “accepts fate rather than cursing it” (Kawai 1996: 178) and is opposed to the active “impatient patriarchal consciousness which tries to fight and overcome” the adversities. Kawai's idea of the “feminine consciousness” is similar in some aspect to Neumann's matriarchal consciousness, but Kawai takes distance from Neumann's dialectic and hierarchic vision of the matriarchal consciousness as separate and inferior to the patriarchal one (Kawai 1996: 179). His goal is demonstrating with a Jungian approach the strength and validity of the feminine consciousness via its representation through female archetypes of the Japanese folklore. Needless to say, he holds a point of view in looking at the figure of the *yamauba* and at the many female images analyzed in his work, which is dramatically different from Saegusa's stance, not only because of the psychological insight, but especially because of his extremely essentialist focus on what he considers the “Japanese

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<sup>6</sup> 「母性との関連における「変容」は、食物の、あるいは妊娠・出産などに示されるように、身体性と切っても切れぬ関係を持つことをその特性としている」。(Kawai 1982: 52).

ego,” supposedly represented by the feminine consciousness and different to the Western and more masculine one. Nevertheless, his insistence in considering the expressions of the multifaceted feminine consciousness as manifestation of a certain attitude of human ego “*regardless of sex*,” in my opinion is similar to the idea of *josei genri* created by Saegusa, which as we shall see is genderless (Kawai 1996: 189).

Coming back to Saegusa’s work, the figure of the *yamauba* presented in the work is embodied by a variety of characters: from the woman changing into child-devouring demon in the prologue to a pitiful grandmother who has miscarried and feels forever guilty in the main story, to a teacher who has been mourning her little brother for thirty-three years, but dreams of killing her students with a knife. The mask 増髪 Masugami, typically used for the role of Sakagami and more generally for the madwoman in *nō*, is often considered to represent a woman possessed by a spirit (Kobayashi 2000: 208), and to combine human and supernatural elements. Therefore, I would argue that we can assign a half-human character to the last variation of the *yamauba* embodied by the elder sister-Sakagami. I wish to point out here that throughout the narrative of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* the *yamauba* figure varies from being demonic to being human or half-human. In showing these many different aspects, I would like to attempt a reading of the *yamauba* figure in this work as an example of transience and I would interpret the whole work as an embodiment of the changing nature of the *yamauba* herself.

Here I need to investigate Saegusa’s outlook in relation to the Buddhist principles I have anticipated above. Referring to Greek myth in order to trace back the matriarchal conception of life, Saegusa postulates a principle to contrast society, which is completely immersed in the patriarchal matrix, “exploring the possibility of uncovering a woman’s way of thinking, a woman-centered philosophy” (Saegusa [1984] 2013a: 129). She explains her thought with the keyword 女性原理 *josei genri*, or “female principle,” often connected to the logic of 同一性 *dōitsusei* “likeness” or “identification” (Saegusa [1983] 2013b: 146), as well as with the Buddhist conception of the world as something where the “human” or *homo sapiens* is not the center of the natural world, as in modern thought, but an integral part of it (Saegusa [1984] 2013a: 127). In this sense, 衆生 *shujō* “all creatures” (Saegusa [1984] 2013a: 128), in every form, must be considered equal. In 1984 Saegusa wrote: “In general, if you say something “differentiates humans *from* animals,” it somehow propels you straight into a humans-are-superior ideology. I detect the assertion of “human superiority” a man’s way of thinking” (Saegusa [1984] 2013a: 128).

She explains that men, being accustomed to fight for power, apply the principle of 区別 *kubetsu* “distinction,” which she explains in Hegelian terms: “in order for A to be A, we must start from the

negation of A” (Saegusa [1983] 2013b: 139). On the other hand, “women’s logic is equipped with an ability to find common ground, to embrace others or identify with others” (Saegusa [1983] 2013b: 156). A woman does not need to establish a self “by wedging a stake in the flow of nature’s abundant life force to claim it as his own,” but “she immerses herself in nature, listens to the voice of nature” (Saegusa [1983] 2013b: 156). It is interesting to note Saegusa’s focus on the voice as the defining aspect of nature, because we can easily link it to the voices heard in the mountains, which are so frequent in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* as well as in other works.

#### 6. The critique of anthropocentrism and attempt to decentralize the *dansei genri*

It is obvious that this concept of the affinity between woman and nature is not exclusive to Saegusa, but rather started spreading with so-called ecofeminist theories. In the mid-1980s, Aoki Yayoi, the first scholar to promote ecofeminist theories in Japan, was involved in a public debate with Ueno Chizuko, probably the best-known feminist in Japan, who accused Aoki of basing her analysis on an essentialist stance. In 1986 Ueno wrote 『女は世界を救えるか?』 *Onna ha sekai wo sukueru ka?* (Can Women Save the Earth?), criticizing Aoki's views. Onabe Tomoko explains: “Ueno fears that Aoki’s ecofeminism forces feminism to blindly accept the female principle allotted by male-dominant culture, which could result in allowing oneself to be trapped within the framework created by male-dominant culture” (Onabe 2019: 116-7). It is probably difficult now – and I guess it was even more difficult at the time – to distinguish the stance underlying Saegusa’s works – imbued with Buddhist concepts – from a common essentialist stance, where rigidly dividing what is “female” from what is “male” risks confining both categories to a narrow model.

Kurata Yōko – the one scholar who, together with Yonaha Keiko, has most extensively studied Saegusa’s writing – mentions a 1985 round table in which Ueno Chizuko labelled Saegusa’s thought as pertaining to ジェンダー差異派 *jendā saiha* “the faction of gender difference thought” (Kurata 2014: 137) because of her focus on the distinction between the female and the male principle. Kurata argues that this accusation is unjust, since it considers Saegusa’s “female principle” something concrete, while Kurata calls it 亡霊的 *bōreiteki*, “ghostly,” or 現前不可能 *genzen fukanō* “impossible to manifest” (Kurata 2014: 130). Even if I share Ueno’s sense of discomfort towards an analogy between “woman” and “nature” – especially when the latter is still generally considered inferior to culture – I agree with Kurata that this “ghostly” female principle is something which is not tangible, but which can be used to search for a different logic, as a heuristic instrument allowing us to stop taking for granted any morals or habits which we have been brought up with. Precisely because it is not a concrete and fixed logic, it is supposed to undermine the principles which have sustained patriarchal

society until now. Saegusa hopes that “women’s philosophy” will develop “in spite of” a male-centered dominant logic, rather than “because of” it (Saegusa [1984] 2013a: 132).

In more recent times, so-called posthuman feminism has assigned further significance to the critique of anthropocentrism initially developed in feminist and ecofeminist environments (Gaard 2011: 34, 42). Rosi Braidotti – who, together with Donna Haraway, is probably the best-known posthuman feminist – quotes Mies and Shiva, two famous names in ecofeminism, who as early as the beginning of the 1990s started underlining the importance of the interconnection between human and non-human beings, and to criticize every form of discrimination based on “othering,” such as those based on gender, race or species. Although she distances herself from their being overly critical of everything “Western,” she acknowledges the importance of Shiva’s contribution to the rethinking of gender and development (Mellor 1994: 119). In 2005 Braidotti argues:

Post-humanism is a fast-growing new intersectional feminist alliance. It gathers the remains of post-structuralist anti-humanism and joins them with feminist reappraisals of contemporary genetics and molecular biology in a non-deterministic frame.(...) Vandana Shiva stresses the extent to which the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy. (Braidotti 2005: 178)

In the same article she postulates a new vision of otherness which lies at the basis of her idea of posthuman theory, which is very distant from the dystopic and cybernetic image this theory often acquires in popular culture (Oppermann 2013: 28):

Fortunately, otherness remains also as the site of production of counter-subjectivities. Feminist, post-colonial, black, youth, gay, lesbian and trans-gender counter-cultures are positive examples of these emergent subjectivities which are ‘other’ only in relation to an assumed and implicit ‘Same.’ How to disengage difference or otherness from the dialectics of Sameness is therefore the challenge. Intersecting lines of ‘otherness’ map out the location of what used to be the ‘constitutive others’ of the unitary subject of classical humanism. They mark the sexualised bodies of women; the racialised bodies of ethnic or native others and the naturalised bodies of animals and earth others. (Braidotti 2005: 170)

This “implicit ‘Same’” Braidotti speaks about is, in my view, similar to the 男性原理 *dansei genri*, the “male principle” at the basis of anthropocentrism which Saegusa postulates in her essays. Braidotti too has trouble defining how we can disengage from the same-other dialectic and shed light on emergent subjectivities, but she is positive about the possibility of doing so. And all this can happen *in spite of* the exploitation brought about by the “global economy,” exactly as Saegusa, twenty years

before, postulated a “ghostly” female principle which would develop *in spite of* the male-centered logic dominating society.

In her later and seminal work *The Posthuman* (2013: 100-1), Braidotti deepens her vision of otherness and declares:

In my view, posthuman ethics urges us to endure the principle of not-One at the in-depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to the multiple ‘others’ in a vital web of complex interrelations. *This ethical principle breaks up the fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness*, but also the master narratives of primordial loss, incommensurable lack and irreparable separation. What I want to emphasize instead, in a more affirmative vein, is *the priority of the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire*, which one is not in charge of.

This humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject, anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the ‘self.’ (...) A materialist politics of posthuman differences works by potential becomings that call for actualization. (...) *It actualizes a community that is not bound negatively by shared vulnerability, the guilt of ancestral communal violence, or the melancholia of unpayable ontological debts, but rather by the compassionate acknowledgement of their interdependence with multiple others* most of which, in the age of anthropocene, are quite simply not anthropomorphic. [italics mine]

Although one cannot say that Saegusa’s position was as affirmative as Braidotti’s, I would argue that her view of the community is both what Braidotti is trying to overcome and what she is hoping might come true in the future. This is why I find certain posthuman principles crucial in order to understand Saegusa’s stance as it emerges from *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, since the village in which the story is set embodies the ambivalence towards what the community represents for Saegusa, as I have explained above. To put it in Braidotti’s terms, Saegusa’s abhorrence of community bonds is due to a fear of the “ancestral communal violence” based on unspoken patriarchal rules, but at the same time it represents the realization of our “self” as constituted of many “others” and in continuous becoming. These others, Braidotti underlines, may be human or non-human. Here her use of the concept of “zoe” emerges. She explains:

Post-anthropocentrism is marked by the emergence of ‘the politics of life itself’ (...). ‘Life,’ far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended. This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for anthropos, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as zoe. Zoe as the dynamic, self organizing structure of life itself [...] stands for

generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism (Braidotti 2013: 60).

Clearly, we cannot say that Seagusa was living the same experience of “advanced capitalism” as Braidotti when she was writing *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*. But she definitely foreshadowed some of Braidotti’s stances also as far as the basic concept of *zoe* is concerned, which elsewhere in the book Braidotti defines in terms reminiscent of the Great Mother’s ambivalently creative and destructive power: “The starting point is the relentless generative but also destructive force of *zoe* and the specific brand of trans-species egalitarianism which they establish as the grounds for posthuman ethics. It is a matter of forces as well as of ethology” (Braidotti 2013: 140).

In Seagusa’s work we find a similar concept to that of “Life itself” through the archetype of the Great Mother or *yamauba* who, as said above, embodies eternal becoming and denies the *dansei genri* of anthropocentrism. I will anticipate here that Seagusa, in my reading, creates all the variations of the *yamauba* we have seen above by changing the focus and experimenting with a new point of view, which no longer takes any human (= male) centrality for granted. Details such as those of the abandoned kittens or the dying dog that crop up in the story confirm my view of the work as an experimental attempt to capture all the aspects of what Seagusa calls *dōitsu*, the “oneness” of beings at the basis of her philosophy – what we might instead call the “not-Oneness” of the subject, borrowing Braidotti’s terms. Saegusa, with her *yamauba*, represents not only the “universality beyond gender” which Mizuta Noriko (2002: 24) speaks about in her first work on the *yamauba*, but also beyond species and elements of nature.

At this point, it may be said that Saegusa’s thought, as reflected in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, foreshadows many aspects of posthuman feminism. This becomes very evident when we examine the central concept of death. I will quote one passage which explains Braidotti’s vision of death in connection to *zoe*.

This means that what we all fear the most, our being dead, the source of anguish, terror and fear, does not lie ahead but is already behind us; it has been. This death that pertains to a past that is forever present is not individual but impersonal; it is the precondition of our existence, of the future. (...) I want to stress instead the productive differential nature of *zoe*, which means the productive aspect of the life–death continuum. It does not deny the reality of horrors, but rather to re-work it so as to assert the vital powers of healing and compassion (Braidotti 2013: 132).

I find it interesting that Seagusa speaks of time in relation to death, by borrowing the ancient Greek concept of *kairos* in opposition to the rectilinear conception of time embodied by *chronos*, when she wants to underline the eternal flow of life and death in Buddhist terms, as explained above. In doing so, she demonstrates that life (or death) is just an occurrence in the flux of the eternal life of creatures (Yonaha 2014, 151). Instead of *kairos*, Braidotti speaks of *aion* (as the time of Eternal being) in opposition to *chronos*, but the effect of the contrast is similar, also because *kairos* is considered – as a moment of inspired creativeness – part of *aion* in the ancient Greek conception of time (Philippon 1949: 91):

As an individual occurrence it will come in the form of the physical extinction of the body, but as event, in the sense of the awareness of finitude, of the interrupted flow of my being there, death has already taken place. We are all synchronized with death – death is the same thing as the time of our living, in so far as we all live on borrowed time. The time of death as event is the impersonal continuous present of Aion, perpetual becoming, not only the linear and individualized Chronos. The temporality of death is time itself, by which I mean the totality of time (Braidotti 2013: 133).

In our work, the *yamauba*, a mother and therefore creator, is also a cause of death, but she does not die herself, as she embodies the idea of a continuous present and perpetual becoming – what Braidotti calls the “generative force of zoe – life beyond the ego-bound human” (Braidotti 2013: 133).

In this sense, in my reading not only are the many variations of the *yamauba* – a keyword in this work that is supposedly “female” in gender – a metaphor of the *josei genri*, but so is the other non-human character and male protagonist: Ryō. This is why he roams the mountains like a *yamauba* and constantly metamorphoses into natural elements before entering the *chūin*, the road to the realm of death, from which they say people cannot come back. Actually we do not know if Ryō will come back and we are left with this doubt, because, in virtue of his non-bodily, non-human nature, he can probably challenge every “rule” created by our individualistic and anthropocentric vision. We also have another group of people who do not pertain to *dansei genri* even if they are of male gender: the old men going to the mountain to commit group suicide. In Braidotti’s terms, they embody both aspects of the community, sharing “the melancholia of unpayable ontological debts,” but also “the compassionate acknowledgement of their interdependence with multiple others” (Braidotti 2013: 101).

### 7. *Obasute*: victim or perpetrator?

Here it is important to return to the other theme which emerges in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*: the abandonment of the weak. I have already discussed the abandonment of children, but what I want to stress here is the role of the abandonment of the elderly in this work. Through the metaphor of the *obasute*, Saegusa's novel illustrates the problem of the care of the elderly, which was becoming more and more felt in the 1980s because of the changes in the conception of the family (Kurata 2010: 152). There is no proof that in Japanese history the abandonment of the elderly was an established practice, but it remains strong as an image. In a scene of Saegusa's work, an old man attending Ryō's grandmother's funeral considers the deceased 103-year-old woman lucky, because she was surrounded by her family. He says: "Today, young people do not abandon their parents in the mountains anymore. Instead, they leave the village early. When you look at our village, it's not necessary to look deep into the mountains, because you can find many *obasute* right in front of your eyes" 『今日びの若い者は、昔の若い者のよに背負うて捨てにはいかんわ。その代わりに、早目に親捨てして村を出る。わしの村を見とると、姥捨ては、何も深い山奥とは限らん、現在、目の前が姥捨て山じゃ』 (Saegusa 1987: 160).

Elderly people who are bedridden or are losing their mental faculties find it difficult to be independent and live alone. Jason Danely, who has studied how the archetype of the *obasute* has been reiterated in different Japanese cultural products, uses the expression "death-in-life" (Danely 2014: 139) to describe this situation where a person is stuck half way between life and death, and obliged to depend on others. For different reasons, the *yamauba* is a liminal figure as well, without a fixed identity, who drifts like a cloud. She is generally considered a perpetrator and indeed becomes one in the prologue of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*. On the contrary, the *obasute* is considered a victim and in the main text appears in this role, both metaphorically and factually, as mentioned in the quotation above. In my reading, the analogy of the *yamauba* and *obasute* in this work serves to relativize the concepts of victim and perpetrator, which in turn are linked to the above idea of the non-Oneness of the subject.

In the main text there is another quotation from the *Prajnaparamita sutra*. It says: 『一切有情、殺害三界不墮悪趣』 *issaiujō, satsugaisangaifudaakushu*. It is a sentence which Ryō's grandmother taught him in order to keep the *yamauba* away when walking in the mountains. This time it does not refer to insubstantiality of things, but to the inevitability of killing other beings. This sentence is explained in the narrative from Ryō's point of view with these words: "even if you might kill the creatures of the three worlds, if you recite Han'nyakyō, you cannot fall on the wrong path." 『たとい



三界のあらゆる生き物を殺害しても、大般若経を誦すれば悪道に堕ちない』 (Saegusa 1987: 138).

After this explanation, the narrative adds that for Ryō these words save living creatures that are obliged to kill others in order to survive, exactly like him, who is alive thanks to his mother's death. Again, by denying the perpetrator's guilt, he/she is assimilated to the victim. One person brings death and the other receives it, but in Saegusa's work the boundaries between the subject and the object are blurred. In *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* there are some morally unacceptable actions like killing one's daughter-in-law in order to eat, but the downplaying of the guilt created by the fluid narrative construction of the subject allows the reader to accept this act within the economy of the narrative. In so doing, for example the killing of a human being is set on the same level as the killing of kittens, de-hierarchizing all categories of living beings. In an interview, Saegusa underlines that there can be no separation between victim and perpetrator, and she reaches the provocative conclusion that even a rapist can be considered the victim of something, especially in a war (Hijiya-Kirschner 2018: 146). As said above, Saegusa often risks offending the sensitivity of victims of crime, but she nevertheless chooses to relativize all situations. This aspect of Saegusa's thought becomes very clear, for example, in the work 『江口水駅』 *Eguchi suieki* (1981): its protagonist, an ex-comfort woman, is depicted not as a victim but, on the contrary, as someone enthusiastic about her past as a war prostitute (Moro 2018).

In *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, the metaphor of *obasute* for old parents, abandoned by their children, who do not wish to take care of them, depicts the elderly as victims; but at the same time we find a grandmother who has killed her grandchild and, in the prologue, elderly parents who kill their daughter-in-law who is taking care of them. These are all different characters, but in the peculiar narrative of *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* there is no real distinction between self and other, dead and alive. Everything is relative and can change, there is no absolute truth. Here the dismantling of modern subjects becomes evident through the Buddhist denial of the self.

Saegusa reflects on human behavior from various points of view without ever justifying or criticizing it. Baba Akiko argues that the *yamauba's* philosophy is very close to “the poorest, most deeply marginalized people” 『「もっとも乏しく、もっとも深く疎外された人々の思想に近い」と明らかになります。』 (Baba: 286). Saegusa herself in the above quoted interview (Tamashiro *et al.* 1985: 38) admitted that in her coming narratives she would try to create a world bringing together all 「無辜の者、力のない者」 *muko no mono, chikara no nai mono* “creatures without guilt and without power.”

This again links the main topic of the work with the ideas of posthumanism, since whereas the *dansei genri* is based on the struggle for power, the *josei genri* must focus on other aspects of human and non-human society and start anew, from a “transformation of the interior through a self-cleansing of male culture” (Nakayama [1986] 2006: 152).

#### 8. “Nomori:” a male following the *josei genri*

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this concept of *dansei genri* and *josei genri*, I now wish to analyze the aspect of death from this point of view in relation to another work of Saegusa’s, 「野守」 “Nomori,” a short story inspired by the *nō* of the same name from the aforementioned collection *Nomori no kagami* (Saegusa 1980b). The protagonist is an old man who has lost his wife the year before the narrative starts and the exclusive point of view of the narrative is his narrating “I.” He moves in with his son’s family and at the beginning he finds it rude that his daughter-in-law makes him do his own laundry, but then he understands how much his wife had been spoiling him, rigidly following the postwar gender roles of the “good wife and wise mother.” He then starts reflecting on his wife’s life, seeing it from a different perspective, and realizes that she was probably never happy with him, but that she only fulfilled her supposed duties, with little satisfaction. Through the protagonist’s recollections, we learn that his wife did not die from the health problem she had, which was a broken leg, but only because she chose to stop eating after becoming bedridden, so as not to be a burden to her family. He soon starts feeling that he himself is probably a burden to his son, and especially to his daughter-in-law, and decides to leave the house and find death, inspired by his wife’s decision. Even if he is not very religious, he has the *nō* chant of *Nomori* in mind, and he decides to go on a pilgrimage to a temple in Kyōto in search of the “mirror of Nomori” – a Buddhist expression that means to see what one’s eyes normally cannot see. The story ends with him having the vision of two butterflies, representing his wife’s soul and his own. As soon as he sees them, he realizes that even if they were emotionally apart when alive, now they are together. He sees the mirror in the hands of a statue of the deity Fudō-Myō-ō, and finds death peacefully on the temple floor.

According to my reading these butterflies are an embodiment of what Saegusa, borrowing an abovementioned Buddhist term, would call *shujō*, all living creatures, an eternal flow into which the narrating “I” finally decides to throw himself, abandoning his ego. This is due to his realizing how he mistreated his wife by exercising power over her and by living within the narrow limits of his *dansei genri*-like mentality. Royall Tyler (1987: 29) summarizes the core of the play *Nomori* with the concept of “non duality of subject and object,” which is exactly what the protagonist “learns” throughout the narrative. I would argue that, inspired by his wife’s decision, the man also follows her path by

abandoning himself to the *josei genri*, in accordance with nature and the eternal flow of life and death, exactly like in *Murakumo no mura no monogatari* the old men who commit group suicide and the elephant from the legend – mentioned twice in the work – who supposedly knows when it is dying and goes directly where other elephants have ceased to live before.

In 1991 Saegusa wrote an article discussing the novel 『檜山節考』 *Narayama bushikō* (The Ballad of Narayama, 1956) by Fukazawa Shichirō. She argued that Fukazawa expresses well the pain a woman feels in her old age and that it is a work which is based on a philosophy close to *josei genri* (Saegusa 1991: 199-201). In this story, a variation on the *obasute* theme, the old woman obliges her son to take her to the mountain to die. In the same article, Saegusa admits that in the past she has tried to depict aging men, but that it is difficult for her as a woman to express the male perception of old age because men do not accept that a woman might depict their weaknesses (Saegusa 1991: 201). Probably one of the works she is referring to in this article is “Nomori” (along with *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*), but I suppose that she has not been successful in depicting men’s pain only if we consider this depiction from a *dansei-genri*-centered point of view. If instead we see this novel as an expression of the *josei genri*, the pain that needs to be described is obviously a much lighter one, due to the acceptance that “as event, in the sense of the awareness of finitude, of the interrupted flow of my being there, death has already taken place” (Braidotti 2013: 133).

## 9. Conclusions

*Murakumo no mura no monogatari* is not Saegusa’s most famous work referring to the figure of the *yamauba*. Rather, this figure is most famously explored in the four-part narrative focusing on the character Hibikiko. Amy Gwen Christiansen – quoted by Carol Fairbanks (2002: 327) – argues that the first work 『響子微笑』 *Hibikiko mishō* (Hibikiko’s Smile, 1988) “presents a *yamamba* heroine who is autonomous and at the same time fully integrated with her community.” Christiansen goes on to summarize all parts of the narrative, which describes Hibikiko’s upbringing in a village, and she says that “at every stage of her life [Hibikiko] violates social conventions: she has three children with three different men, never marries, rejects the concept of *filial piety* but, because of her powerful personality derived from her oneness with “the cosmos,” she is never ostracized” (Fairbanks 2002: 327). Probably in Hibikiko’s narratives the idea of the *yamauba* as unity with nature reaches its peak, as for example in the scene where she feels the mountain inside her body and recalls that when she felt like this in the past, people used to say that she was possessed by the spirit of the *yamauba* (Saegusa 1988: 255). Yonaha argues that Hibikiko’s four-part narrative “is a work which expresses the *josei genri* in its ultimate form” (Yonaha 2014: 166).

I believe that *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, written just one year before the series on Hibikiko, provides an interesting case study for deepening the reflection on the two above-mentioned aspects of the community and the figure of the *yamauba*, both linked to the *josei genri* as a genderless principle. Although the word *josei* can be easily misunderstood as an essentialist term or one suggesting a binary stance, this work shows the possibilities disclosed by the decentralization of (male) power through a different point of view, which is neither simplistic nor banal: a point of view based on the controversial idea of non-duality between victim and perpetrator and on the dismantling of the distinction between human and non-human.

With my analysis I hope to have shown how a work like *Murakumo no mura no monogatari*, which challenges the concept of “human” through the archetype of the *yamauba*, sticks out from the common use of the *yamauba* archetype in literature and can be read from a contemporary point of view such as posthuman theory, “resisting the myth of organicism and holistic harmony, but also capitalist opportunism” (Braidotti 2013: 101).

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