Hiroshima Survivors and Their "Mother Country," America: An Examination of the Japanese-American Hibakushas in Naomi Hirahara's Summer of the Big Bach

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Hiroshima Survivors and Their "Mother Country," America:
An Examination of the Japanese-American Hibakushas in Naomi Hirahara's *Summer of the Big Bachi*

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Introduction
Many details about the statistical number of the victims of the two bombings dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been revealed; it is said that by the end of December, 1945, more than one billion and forty thousand civilians were killed in Hiroshima and seventy thousand in Nagasaki. In this situation, however, at least two billion people were said to have survived in Hiroshima. But few know, even today, that among the survivors, especially in Hiroshima, there were people originally from the U.S. who headed to their birthplace after the dreadful experience. According to the research of Rinjiro Sodei, a Japanese political scientist, these people are called “Kibei,” and they presumably numbered at least nine hundred. Why these Japanese-American civilians had been staying in Hiroshima on that fatal day is still a mystery. Sodei's research shows that some of them happened to visit Hiroshima, and had been staying with their grandparents. Another example indicates that they had been staying Hiroshima because of their parents’ strict Japanese styled educational policy. However, little information has come out until now about the Japanese-American “hibakusha,” and their decision to go back to their birth place, where they had once almost been killed by a horrible weapon. In regards to these people, one thing is obvious: they must have undergone tremendous sufferings in the U.S. — namely, their mother country, which had not even the slightest feeling of companionship toward them during the WWⅢ.

A Japanese-American novelist, Naomi Hirahara, has written four series
of novels on a reticent old gardener named Mas Arai, a Hiroshima survivor. Mas Arai is supposedly a reflection of the author’s own father, who was a survivor of Hiroshima and returned to the U.S. in 1947. Of the Mas Arai novels, the second one, entitled Summer of the Big Bachi (2004), describes a Hiroshima survivor’s inner distress and his silent life after the traumatic incident he was forced to witness in Hiroshima. Summer of the Big Bachi is a story about a Hiroshima survivor, Mas Arai, who lives alone in a small town in the U.S. One day a man from Japan visited Mas’s place, and this old gardener was shocked to hear from this stranger the name of a man whom he had known in Hiroshima 40 years ago. Although Mas has kept buried his Hiroshima experience for several decades, after the strange meeting with this visitor, he is forced not to keep what really happened when the bomb fell on Hiroshima in August 1945 a secret anymore. This issue is at the core of this story.

Mas Arai is described as quite a difficult character to be understood, supposedly because of his ambivalent disposition. He considers his certain acts in Hiroshima a “sin,” and is extremely frightened to be accused by someone. However, when his “sin” is not recognized by anyone, he falls into a fit of remorse. It is interesting that though Mas recognizes himself as an American citizen, his disposition accords with what Ruth Benedict, an American anthropologist, asserts in her eminent book, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (1946). This study had been completed under quite an unsettled circumstances during WWⅡ, so Benedict could not travel around Japan. However, she was able to contact with important examinees in the U.S: namely, Japanese-American people. Through the eyes of this U.S. researcher, Mas Arai, too, must be one of those people who carry two opposite cultures within them, one of those typical Japanese what the Americans were trying to understand.

What is important to note here is that Mas Arai's way of using a certain Japanese word seems quite different from the way people living in Japan use the same word. According to the Japanese dictionary Kojien, the word bachi is usually defined as a punishment by God for committing certain kinds of serious sins. The author Naomi Hirahara also defines it thus: “In Japanese, bachi was when you snapped at your wife, and then tripped a rock in the driveway”(1). “Bachi” is
understood by the author as something close to “curse.” However, Mas’s usage of this word seems a little exaggerated when we consider “sins” he committed in Hiroshima after the bomb. Though I will discuss his “sin” in a later section, but what I would like to again emphasize here is that there is a great difference between a Japanese’s definition of the word Bachi and Mas’s. See, for instance, the following:

After Chizuko’s miscarriage, Mas stopped playing cards. Chizuko kept her nagging, but it took on another tone. The words were the same, but all their power was gone. It continued like this for twenty years, two decades filled with one bachi after another. In the end, he was the only one left in their three-bedroom house at the bottom of the San Gabriels, the purple peaks now barely visible due to the smog. Even their mutt dog was gone. (4-5)

“No more waiting.” Riki set out his hand. “Two pair.” He flashed two queens and two tens. Mas felt the top of his head tingle. (124)

The first scene shows that Chizuko, Mas’s wife, had a miscarriage when Mas Arai was playing card games. The couple’s relation has gotten worse because of his absence. The second one is the scene in which Mas joins an unscrupulous poker game in place of his innocent friend. These excerpts have two similar implications. In the former one, Mas feels great guiltiness for what he had been doing during his wife's delivery, and for this reason, he becomes susceptible to his guilt and tends to blame himself when something bad happens. In the latter, we get a glimpse of Mas’s sensitivity about having bad “karma.” In short, Mas Arai becomes a paranoiac regarding what he had done. Considering these examples, we can assert that his understanding of “bachi” is slightly different from what the English word “punishment” means, because in general, if a person deserves the punishment, he/she is afraid of being blamed by others, not afraid of what he/she had done. On
the other hands, in this novel, “bachi” can be hardly be said to be expressed as the one quite close to what Japanese perceive. I therefore came to think that when Mas Arai uses this word, there must be some peculiar concept originated from Japanese-American people who experienced the bomb in Hiroshima, fled to their birthplace after World War II, and that his peculiar definition of the word ‘bachi’ would have a close relationship with what the Japanese American civilians had to face after returning to the U.S. In this paper, I would like first to consider the circumstances around the Japanese-American survivors of Hiroshima after they had started to live again in the U.S. Second, I would like to hone in on the psychological mechanism of Mas Arai’s inner feelings: how does his memory of Hiroshima function, and how is it recognized? And finally, I would like to demonstrate how Mas’s recognition of his Hiroshima memory relates to the Japanese American survivors’ perception of their sense of guilt.

Ⅱ. What does it mean for Japanese-American Hiroshima survivors to live in the U.S.?

Although few people are aware of it, Hiroshima has a particular historical background apart from the well-known atomic bomb incident. It is said that in the early 1900s, a great number of people left Hiroshima and headed to the U.S. as immigrants. For this reason, quite a few people believed that the U.S. would never bomb the city of Hiroshima, from where their civilians came. The four major cities of Japan that were targeted, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had a relatively small number of bomb attacks. This fact fortified Hiroshima civilians’ conviction that they would be spared. But the fact was quite different from what they had expected. The U.S. force had been kept silence for these cities, because they wanted to investigate the two a-bombs power as correctly as possible.

In this situation, not only civilians of Hiroshima but also Japanese-Americans who temporary lived in Hiroshima were astounded when the bomb, which no one had ever experienced in their entire history, fell on August 6th.
The latter must have especially questioned their fate. A patriotic Japanese-American character, named Joji Haneda, who has U.S. citizenship in *The Summer of the Big Bachi*, dies after the explosion, and from his agonizing death, we can assume how tragic it was for Hiroshima citizens to have miscalculated that they were spared.

As we can assume from the above, the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima had an unspoken but traumatic impact on Japanese-American citizens. What should be noted here is that it was after their returning to the U.S. that the Japanese-American bomb survivors started to feel a sense of guilt. Here I would like to look at what situation they faced in the U.S. society and what kinds of “guiltiness” they had compared to the Japanese survivors.

American journalist John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, which was published in *The New Yorker* a year after the bomb fell on Hiroshima, portrays six bomb survivors’ inner feelings. He describes one of the female characters’ remarks about her bomb experience, as follows;

As Nakamura-san struggled to get from day to day, she had no time for attitudinizing about the bomb or anything else. She was sustained, curiously, by a kind of passivity, summed up in a phrase she herself sometimes used – “Shikata ga-nai,” meaning, loosely, “It can’t be helped.” She was not religious, but she lived in a culture long colored by the Buddhist belief that resignation might lead to clear vision…(*Hiroshima* 122, emphasis added)

Hersey considers Mrs. Nakamura’s remark on her dreadful experience to be a typical Japanese one, but more importantly, he focuses not only on this kind of archetypical thinking of the Japanese but also on Mrs. Nakamura’s rare attitude toward the Hiroshima incident. Hersey finds that when the survivors of Hiroshima accept their fate, and when they say “It can’t be helped,” they involuntarily recognize their "fault"; namely, what their country did to other countries. In short, Mrs. Nakamura’s remark is unbecoming to a hibakusha, and perhaps this is the reason
why her words strike Hersey so strongly. I would like to present a similar example below.

These thoughts led her [another Hiroshima survivor] to an opinion that was unconventional for a hibakusha: that too much attention was paid to the power of the A-Bomb, and not enough to the evil of war. (Hiroshima 157, emphasis added)

From the above excerpt, we find that Hersey implies that the hibakusha’s attitude toward the responsibility of Japan for what they did to other Asian countries during the war period can be hardly seen. So it is obvious that the author is positive about “her opinion.”

On the other hand, if we focus on Japanese-American survivors such as Mas Arai, or Benedict’s examinees, we need to consider more carefully about the relation between Japan’s responsibility for the war and their victimhood. The point I make below might seem a controversial one, but in Japan, in general, survivors of the two bombs cannot be blamed for Japan’s war crimes; they deserve to be spared because of their victimhood. It is the Nation, not the individual, that is responsible for what has occurred during wartime. In other words, “The Nation” works as a bulwark against all the deeds led by Japan during WW[]. Of course, Japanese hibakusha consist of various citizens, and surely there are people who oscillate between two abhorrent self-consciousnesses; such people cannot decide whether they are ‘the victim’ or ‘the sinner.’

However, one thing is clear. A tremendous effort is required for the Japanese hibakusha to think of their guiltiness when they feel compassionate for others conquered by the Japanese Imperial Forces, while Japanese-American bomb survivors are forced to face their war responsibility with or without any sympathetic view toward others. When Mas Arai recollects his memory of his arrival to the U.S. for the first time in the late 1940s, it is said that he “saw people push” him down, and an American told him, “Hey, Jap, get outta here” (245). From this example, we can see that there was racial discrimination against Japanese. Furthermore, as Ronald Takaki, a Japanese-American historian says, quite a few citizens in the U.S.
are said to have had enmity against one of the most detestable ex-enemies in U.S. history. Related to the U.S. enmity toward Japan as “ex-enemy,” consider the following:

Those who lie here gave their lives,  
That this country,  
Beset by its enemies,  
Might win out of their sacrifice  
Victory and peace.

―Dwight Eisenhower

Mas Arai happens to see these words by Eisenhower when he walks through a garden. We can assume that the word “enemies” signifies Japan. While declaring peace and justice, Eisenhower’s poetic words show the U.S.’s perspective that the world can be divided into categories of good or evil.

As we can see above, U.S. postwar society is quite different from that of Japan, where only a series of piteous relics of WW II have been preserved. U.S. society stands in a neutral position, as it were; they have preserved not only piteous monuments, but also memories which remind people of the past that the Japanese were once their most hated enemy. In other words, Japanese hibakusha living in U.S. society are forced to admit or recognize the guilt for what was committed by Japan as a nation. On the other hand, “Japan” functions as a barrier that protects the citizens having lived during the war, so this situation can be said to be one of the main factors for Hiroshima survivors in the U.S. to have a sense of guilt. We should not miss another important factor that determines Japanese-American hibakusha’s guiltiness. As I stated before, quite a few civilians from Hiroshima headed to the U.S. after the bomb was dropped under various circumstances, but at the same time, this fact tortured them because they might have considered their immigration as an escape from a “defeated” nation. As a consequence, they do not talk about their Hiroshima experiences. This may be one of the reasons why it is hard for us to find a-bomb literature or even memorandums written by Japanese-American hibakusha,
while we can find a variety of literatures written by Japanese authors such as Shuntaro Hida, Tamiki Hara, Sadako Kurihara, Kyoko Hayashi, etc.

II. Mas Arai and His Hiroshima Memory

Here I would like to examine the function of Mas Arai’s Hiroshima memory; how he faces his a-bomb experience and how he reacts to it. To begin with, it is noteworthy to focus on Mas’s characterization as a solitary figure. He is an isolated character who lost his wife; he hardly opens himself to others; he humbly lives alone. His occupation as a “gardener” has a symbolic meaning. Gardeners are not required to communicate with others, so large numbers of Japanese-Americans who had difficulties with the U.S. culture and language were said to be in this position.

The thing about gardening was that you had plenty of time to think. Mas figured that’s why so many gardeners turned out to be gamblers, philosophers, or just plain crazy. (53) The above excerpt suggests that gardening, which was a favorable occupation for Japanese-Americans, hardly allows others to intervene, and that those in that position have too much time to themselves. Although Mas basically appreciates his occupation, which allows him to be alone, he sometimes feels “sick to his stomach” and is reminded of his memoir of his Hiroshima experience, when he “stared at the broken branches jutting out in all different directions like severed arms and legs” (53). It is obvious that in his loneliness, the traumatic experience of Hiroshima suddenly appears in Mas’s inner mind.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Mas Arai is described as a person who cannot share his Hiroshima memories with the other Japanese-American acquaintances. Although Mas grew up in Japan in his youth, he was born in the U.S. and stayed there for the rest of his life. So there seems to be a lot of similarities with other Japanese-American people, at least in terms of race. However, because he had not been living in the U.S. during the war period, he had not experienced the days
when the other Japanese-American people had been in “internment camps,” or at “the war front.”

“You must have seen hell, too, huh, Mas?”…What was it with the Nisei and their desire to memorialize the past? Camp, the war front, they wanted to remember now that their families and wood-framed houses were secure. They had their Purple Hearts and Silver Stars, and could die with their souls at rest. But Mas filled his days with numbers and odds, his only hope to change his history. (103)

It could be assumed that Mas finds a certain distance between one of his Japanese-American friends, who has an honorable memory of war, and himself. It is true in some respect that both of them must have seen “hell” during the war; Mas admits that there is a great difference between the people who had been in the “camp,” or “the war front,” and the people who had seen Hiroshima.

This poses some questions: why does Mas choose to live in confinement, and why he is not able to share his trauma with his fellow men? The answers to these questions are closely related to Mas’s sense of guilt, which consists of his three deeds just after the bomb fell on Hiroshima. First, he recognizes himself as a betrayer who had abandoned one of his Japanese-American friends in the midst of the devastation of Hiroshima. Second is his connivance regarding an old acquaintance’s fault: Mas pretended to know nothing when he found that Riki Kimura, a Hiroshima boy, passed himself off as one of Mas’s Japanese-American friends who died just after the bomb fell. Finally, he sees himself as one who fled: he stole Riki’s money and left Japan for good. For these reasons, Mas is afraid of having a “Big Bachi” someday and cannot share his war experience with others. His “hell” differs greatly with that of others; he believes that he is a sinner and that his deed in Hiroshima deserves to be punished. His sense of guilt prevents him from talking about Hiroshima in a memoir. What, then, does Mas’s sense of “bachi” have to do with the Japanese-American hibakusha’s circumstances in American society?
Ⅲ. The Significance of Mas Arai’s “Bachi”

First, it is important to recall Mas Arai’s particular status: he is a victim of the a-bomb, but at same time he is a “betrayer” who headed to the U.S. after Japan was defeated. This conflicted status is symbolic, because it accords with that of Japanese-American hibakushas living in the U.S, which I mentioned in the second chapter. Both recognize two conflicting qualities inside themselves. I would also like to focus on a description of the notion of “evil,” “guilt,” and “vice,” as below;

One minute friends laughed, full of life; next time, destroyed. Those things never escaped one’s mind. Once you witnessed that, you saw evil, and it didn’t live in just Americans or Japanese. It lived close by, in friends, in neighbors, and, most frighteningly, inside yourself. (319)

The excerpt above signifies that evil does not exist not only in Americans or only in Japanese, but also in our surroundings and even in ourselves. This way of thinking is based on a recognition that everyone who had been involved in the war has debts for the consequences of the war. This idea is peculiar to Mas Arai, but here I think that this peculiarity gets at the true nature of Hiroshima/Nagasaki. That is to say that Mas Arai never accuses anyone by judging what is wrong and what is right. Justice generates nothing after his having experienced Hiroshima. We should take heed when Mas says that evil lives even “inside yourself.” It is hard for us to imagine that Mas, who had a hell-like experience in Hiroshima, come to attain such enlightenment. However, one thing for sure is that Mas’s idea could only come from a person who happened to know that everyone is capable of committing a crime when put into an abnormal situation. So it could be said that the above excerpt accurately signifies at once Mas Arai’s attitude toward war responsibility and the Japanese-American hibakusha’s complicated circumstances in American society.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Mas Arai recognizes that there exist two conflicting identities inside himself. As a victim of the atomic holocaust, he has been suffering
from trauma, but at the same time, as a “sinner,” he is frightened that someone will discover what he had done in Hiroshima. Therefore he cannot share his dreadful memories with others. Mas Arai’s two conflicted images of himself connote the status of Japanese-American a-bomb survivors: the people who hardly talk about their Hiroshima experience, who have not been allowed to live as a mere victim of war and were forced to live in the shadow of Hiroshima.

However, though Mas Arai tried to seal up his memory throughout the novel, in the last scene he starts to reveal what really happened on August 6th, 1945. Mas decides to reveal his memories when he discovers that a fellow Japanese-American hibakusha died without having told anybody about Hiroshima. Having seen this man’s death, Mas Arai is given a chance to reflect on his own forthcoming demise. I believe that Mas’s revelation signifies Japanese hibakusha’s recent tendency; gradually, they are also starting to talk about their memories of Hiroshima/Nagasaki. Research led by the Asahi Newspaper verifies this. The report said that out of 1,006 hibakusha, exactly 322 bomb survivors answered that it was after 2005 that they had started revealing their experience to others for the first time. This might be because hibakusha must have known that the number of survivors is getting smaller. The novels featuring Mas Arai began to be published in 2004. This fact might indicate that even in America, hibakushas are gradually starting to break the silence, and that their children, who are called “hibaku-nisei,” are becoming the heirs of the Hiroshima story.

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