

Exoticism, or a Device Reflecting Self-Identity? The Role of Japanese Novels Translated into Lithuanian*

Dr. Kyoko Koma

Vytautas Magnus University

Key Words: *Japanese literature¹ translated into Lithuanian, device reflecting self-identity, culturally odourless allegory, Kobo Abe, Haruki Murakami*

ABSTRACT

This study represents the first step toward showing the situation of translated Japanese literature in Lithuanian. According to National Library of Lithuania catalogue information, 51 novels (including 5 cartoons) have been published as of May 31st 2011. According to C. Sakai, if we compare this with France, one of the countries that publishes the most translated Japanese literature, in 2007 642 Japanese books were translated, of which 42 concerned literature, and 600 cartoons (Sakai 2011: 39). It could be said that the translation into Lithuanian results in a very limited choice. The choice of Japanese Literature for translation into Lithuanian has varied according to the period. In the post-Soviet period, when books had to correspond to socialist values, we find translations of, on the one hand, of respected authors such as Yasunari Kawabata, a Nobel prize winner; and on the another hand, authors for whom the novel constitutes an allegory of the social problems of a socialist country, such as Kobo Abe in the 1960s, although a book written by an extreme left-wing author was also translated at the beginning of 1950s. After independence, in particular, around the time of entry to the European union, the literature of Haruki Murakami has translated into Lithuania influenced by the popularity of the Occident. We could say that the translation of Japanese literature in Lithuania was influenced by the social power of each period (from Soviet power to Western capitalist power), and that the translations would not always be able to construct an imagery of Japan. However, even if the world constructed in Murakami's literature was culturally indifferent, his literature permits each reader to reflect on their contemporary problems.

¹ Titles of Japanese literature are written in Roman alphabetic of Japanese transcription with its English translation for general information. Ones translated in Lithuanian are written in Lithuanian, ones in another language including English or others, in English.

* Straipsnio anglų kalbos redaktorius – Daniel Allen.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the situation of Japanese literature translated into Lithuanian. It is true that for foreign readers, translations of Japanese novels could be one of the devices by which public awareness of Japanese culture is increased. However, I would like to ask if the Lithuanian people have constructed an image of Japan through translations of Japanese novels.

I will give an insight into Japanese novels in Lithuanian. According to the data of the Lithuanian National Library *Martynas Mažvytas*, fifty-one novels (including five cartoons) have been published as of May 31st 2011. Compare this with France, one of the countries that publishes the most translations of Japanese Literature, where in 2007 there were 642 translations of Japanese books, of which forty-two were novels, and six hundred were cartoons. This boom in Japanese manga (cartoons) became very popular as a second Japonism, in which Japanese popular culture become an object of real passion for young people in France and other countries.

Compared to the French translation of Japanese literature, which could be considered exhaustive, Lithuanian translation is not yet there and results in very limited choices. The novels chosen for translation construct, for Lithuania, a representation of 'Japanese Literature'. I propose, through this research, to find out if the operative choice was to know a country that is felt to be exotic, or on the contrary, if the Lithuanian translation of Japanese literature reflects Lithuanian socio-political conditions.

1. THE TRANSLATION OF A COMMUNIST WRITER'S BOOK: THE 1950s

According to the data of the Lithuanian National Library *Martynas Mažvytas*, the first Japanese novel translated into Lithuanian was titled *Kiaules dainele*. This novel was written by a Japanese novelist, Teru Takakura, and published by Vaga in 1954.

Teru Takakura is not as well known a writer in worldwide terms as Yasunari Kawabata. For example, a search revealed twenty-eight books by Teru Takakura on the website of Amazon Japan, although they are no longer re-edited: he is not a very popular writer in Japan. A biography was not available, even in the only book we could find, *Miso kuso*, which Takakura wrote in 1947².

Being influenced by the Russian Revolution and Marxism, Takakura went to the Soviet Union and to China and presented himself to the Soviet Communist Party. This translation of Teru Takakura would have been brought about by the political sensibilities then prevalent in Lithuania, although he was not very popular in the wider world. In a Lithuania occupied by the Soviet Union, it would be possible to consider that the publication of this book written by a Japanese communist was already prepared under the presidency of Stalin.

2. THE POPULARITY OF ABE KOBO: FROM THE 1960s TO INDEPENDENCE

It is no longer possible to observe any clear tendency to publish translations of Japanese literature with communist ideas in the literature of the 1960s³. It was again VAGA which published principally translations of Japanese literature: *Rashomon* (1965) by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Šeimyninis gyvenimas* and *Moteris, kurią aš pamečiau* (1970) by Shusaku Endo, *Sniegynų šalis* (1971) and *Kalno aimana* (1976) by Yasunari Kawabata, *Moterys smėlynuose* (1973) by Kobo Abe, *Dama kaip perlas* (1982) by Kan Kikuchi, and more. Library catalogues of Japanese short stories published in Lithuanian literature journals before 1994 are classified into three categories: Kobo Abe, Yasunari Kawabata, and other authors. Thus it is possible to consider that before Lithuanian

² <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%AB%98%E5%80%89%E8%BC%9D> consulted on June 2nd 2011.

³ The ideological censors of the literature and of the art in Lithuania temporally became weak just 1956 (Streikus 2007: 6).

independence, Kobo Abe and Yasunari Kawabata were particularly representative of Japanese Literature in Lithuania at that time.

Yasunari Kawabata (June 14th 1899 - April 16th 1972) was the first Japanese novelist to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (1968). Considered as a novelist haunted by his research into beauty, loneliness and death, he wrote one of the most internationally famous works, *Yukiguni* (*snow country* in English) (1935-1947), which has been translated in thirty-three languages after its first translation in 1956 in the US. In Russia and in Lithuania, this translation was published in 1971. As a writer of international status, Kawabata could be considered representative of Japanese culture⁴.

Kobo Abe was born on March 7 1924 in Tokyo and died on January 22, 1993. His work, *Kabe* (*wall in English*), received the Akutagawa Japanese Literature Prize in 1951. He was interested in communist ideology, participated in a group called Popular Literature, and was published in several journals.

After he visited Eastern Europe in 1956, when he saw directly the reality of communist countries, he started to change his political views⁵. His novel *Suna no Onna* (*the woman in the dune* in English) is translated into about twenty languages, including the first translation into English in 1964 (Keen 2004: 269). The Japanese original text of *Suna no Onna* was published in 1962, when Kobo Abe retired from the Japanese communist party.

In Lithuania, the last part of this novel was translated in a Lithuanian weekly journal *Lit ratūra ir menas, visu saliu proletorai, lietuvos TSR rasytoju sajungos savaitirastis*, in November 1966. Two years later, the complete novel was translated into Lithuanian. That is to say, in Lithuania, this book could be considered 'literature of the proletariat'.

⁴ Source: The Kawabata Foundation (<http://www.kawabata-kinenkai.org/nenpyo.html>) consulted on June 30th 2011.

⁵ Sources: Shoichi Saeki "The paradox of the internationalization" (「国際化のパラドックス」), Shinsuke Tani "The chronologie of Kobo Abe" (「阿部公房年表」) in *Abe Kobo* 『阿部公房』, Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1994, 97-108.

A Japanese literary critic, Shoichi Saeki, presented a hypothetical reason why Abe's books have been read since 1960 in socialist countries:

The absurdity of the human being under the socialist system would correspond strongly with Kobo Abe's literary world. This novel, for the Japanese, does not concern politics, though it could be politic literature according to the social context receiving this novel. (...) This novel is presented as an allegory, which suggests a critical accusation of the communist system (Saeki 1994:100-102).

However, in this period, and in the Lithuanian socialist context, what were the reasons to publish the translation *Suna no Onna*? According to VAGA:

In the Soviet period...finally, it exist - "Glavlit" (censor institution), which would add...some words or dedications so that books correspond to socialist values. The book could be never published without this necessary program⁶.

I infer from this remark that Abes literature was considered of socialist value, in contrast with the works of Mishima, who was very popular in Western Europe but prohibited from publication in the Soviet Union because of the author's extreme right-wing political ideology. I found only a 2004 translation of one novel of Yukio Mishima⁷.

According to Saeki's hypothesis, the novel *Suna no Onna* does not directly construct a critique against the socialist system, but rather

⁶ Source: "Sovietiniu laikotarpiu knygų ieškojimas buvo kitoks. Informacijos - mažai, iš užsienio žinios beveik nepasiekia, o atradęs gerą kūrinį nežinai, ar galėsi jį pateikti skaitytojams. Redakcinės komisijos turėdavo ne tik sutvarkyti kūrinio tekstą kaip literatūros specialistams, bet ir pateikti taip, kad jį leistų spausdinti. "Juk veikė "Glavlit" (cenzūros įstaiga), turėdavo įdėti, kaip mes vadindavome, perkūnsargius - kokių nors žodį ar anonsą, kad knyga skambėtų kaip atitinkanti socialistines vertybes. Be tos būtiniosios programos knygos visai nebūtų išėjusios" – J. Riškutė (Žuolytė 2008).

⁷ Source: Conference held by Aleksandr A. Dolin on *Translation of Japanese Literature in the USSR: From Ancient to Modern* at the 29th Nichibunken Forum (<http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/graphicversion/dbase/forum/text/fn029.html>) consulted on Jan 8th 2012.

is a 'political allegory' suggesting a critique: the accusations against the communist system are tacit because the world of this novel has a many features of Eastern countries (Saeki 1994: 102)⁸. A Ukrainian journalist has written, "Kobo Abe is very understandable for people born in the Soviet Union. I am Ukrainian and for me it is very easy to understand the sentiment of characters in the novel *Suna no Onna*, which is too near to Soviet life to feel exotic"⁹.

It is important to note that *Suna no Onna* is not read only in the Europe formerly dominated by the Soviet Union, but also in other countries. If I could present a citation from Shin'ichiro Nakayama, critic of Japanese literature, *Suna no Onna* is read by exiles from China as a metaphor of Chinese communist society and by American students as a description of a society without the liberty of the USA (Nakayama 1976: 376-377). We could say that a characteristic of Kobo Abe's novel is to generate diversity of interpretation, a feature that permits its publication in Lithuania.

3. THE POPULARITY OF HARUKI MURAKAMI: AFTER INDEPENDENCE AND THE ENTRY OF THE COUNTRY TO THE EU

The translations of some Japanese novelists' books were published after Lithuanian independence, for example Takeo Arishima (published in 1994), Banana Yoshimoto (1996), Kenzaburo Oe (2001); to these were added, after the entry of Lithuania into the European Union, the novels of Yukio Mishima, Kaori Ekuni, Ryu Murakami (2004), Tanizaki Junichiro, Koji Suzuki (2005) as well as translations of Japanese classical authors such as Seisho Nagon (2007) and Saikaku Ihara (2009). The translations

⁸ And Kunio Suzuki, Japanese extreme right-wing thinker, also argued this in order to analyse the situation of North Korea where the translation of this novel has not yet been published. (<http://www.geocities.co.jp/HeartLand-Gaien/2207/2002/Shuchou1230.html>) consulted on May 31st 2011.

⁹ An interview with a Ukrainian journalist in Japan on the Internet journal *Timeout* (<http://www.timeout.jp/ja/tokyo/feature/425>) consulted on May 31st 2011.

of Kobo Abe, Yasunari Kawabata, and Runosuke Akutagawa published around the 1970s, are also remembered in Lithuania; new versions appeared after entry to the European Union.

What is more, there is a new tendency is the translation of Japanese manga such as *Drakonų kovos* by Toriyama Akira, which started in 2007. The database of the Lithuanian National Library mentions translated Japanese manga titles. Despite these tendencies, the most remarkable phenomenon is the popularity of the translations of Haruki Murakami's books.

Haruki Murakami published his first novel, *Kaze no Uta wo Kike* (English translation: *Hear the Wing Sing*), in Japan in 1979, for which he received the Gunzo prize, a Japanese literature prize. After several successful novels, Murakami spent four years in the United States. He taught Japanese literature at Princeton University (where F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of his favourite writers, had been a student), and wrote *Nejimakidori no Kuronikuru* (English translation: *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) (1994, 1995), for which he received the Yomiuri Literary Prize (as had Yukio Mishima, Kenzaburo Oe, and Kobo Abe). He returned to live in Japan in 1995, the year of the Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas attack by the Aum sect in some of the subways of Tokyo. These tragedies inspired the novella *Kami no Kodomotachi wa Mina Odoru* (English translation: *All children of god dance* (English title: *After the Earthquake*)). He received the Franz Kafka Prize (Czech Republic, 2006). His novels have been translated into about forty languages¹⁰.

Since his first translation *Avies medžioklė*, eleven translations of Murakami's books have been published in Lithuania. Most of his novels, except the first two (*Kaze no oto wo kike* (English translation: *Listen the Wind sing*) (1979), *1973 nen no pinboru* (English translation: *Le Pinball, 1973*) (1980)), have been translated. What is more, ten of these eleven translations have been reprinted at least once and some as many as three times (as of June, 2011), as follows:

¹⁰ Source: Random House presenting Haruki Murakami: (<http://www.randomhouse.com/features/murakami/site.php?id=>) consulted on June 2nd 2011.

Title	1 st edition		2 nd edition		3 rd edition		4 th edition	
	year	copies	year	copies	year	copies	year	copies
Avies medžioklė	2003	3000	2005	3000	2003	3000	2009	3000
Dansu dansu dansu	2004	2000	2006	3000	2009	3000		
Negailestinga stebuklų šalis ir Pasaulio galas	2004	3000	2005	3000	2006	3000	2009	3000
Norvegų giria	2005	3000	2009	3000	–	–	–	–
Žmogaus Avies Kalėdos	2005	2000	–	–	–	–	–	–
Prisukamo paukščio kronikos	2006	2000	2007	3000	2009	3000	–	–
Kafka pakrantėje	2007	3000	2009	3000	–	–	–	–
Į pietus nuo sienos, į vakarus nuo saulės	2007	3000	2009	3000	–	–	–	–
Mylimoji Sputnik	2008	3000	2009	3000	–	–	–	–
Pernakt	2009	3000	–	–	–	–	–	–
1 Q84	2011	3000	–	–	–	–	–	–

Source: The Lithuanian National Library.

The number of copies published for a translation of Murakami is on average about three thousand, though for Mishima in 2004 it was eighteen hundred, and for Tanizaki published in 2007, it was fifteen hundred; the translations of Mishima and Tanizaki have not been reprinted as yet. By comparison, *Negailestinga stebuklų šalis ir Pasaulio galas* – the Murakami novel that saw the most important diffusion – has had three reprints, bringing to twelve thousand the number of reprinted copies since 2004.

These numerous reprints of books by Haruki Murakami testify to a real demand from the Lithuanian public and could not be manipulated by any political or commercial power.

How is the literature of Haruki Murakami considered in Lithuania? When the first translation of Haruki Murakami's *Avies medžioklė* was published, its publisher in Lithuania, Baltos lankos, published a press

release on the Lithuanian DELFI information site dated November 21st 2003.

Haruki Murakami is one of the potential candidates of realist Japanese Literature for the Nobel prize... It is completely normal...to discuss a new Murakami book in a coffee shop or restaurant... This idea is also sustained by the Occident where the successful translation of Murakami's novels are sold on a large scale never seen... American critics recognise that there is no writer equivalent to Murakami today... Murakami has become the most popular Japanese writer on the planet.¹¹

Here, the important thing is not that Murakami is Japanese, but rather that he has great success in the West¹². In fact, why is the literature of Haruki Murakami read in Lithuania? Sachiko Yuri, an editor of *Asahi Shinbun*, one of Japan's representative newspapers, explained it as follows:

the reason why the literature of Murakami is read beyond the frontiers of Japan is, for example, in China young Chinese shared the sentiments of Murakami's characters, such as the sentiment of loss, of loneliness in a Chinese society in which the economy was developing quickly (as happened in Japan in the 1970s); in the

¹¹ Haruki Murakami – "vienas realiausių japonų literatūros pretendentų į Nobelio premiją. Būtent taip mano Japonijos jaunimas, laikantis geru tonu kavinėje prie viskio stiklo diskutuoti apie naują Murakami knygą. Atrodo, šią mintį palaiko ir Vakarai, kur japonų korifėjaus vertimų tiražai pasiekė neregėtą mastą. Amerikos kritikai pripažįsta – šiandien nėra Murakami prilygstančio rašytojo. Nedaug rasite rašytojų, kurie taip trauktų jaunimą: paskutinės dvi Murakami knygos Londone buvo tiesiog išgraibstytos. (...) Beveik prieš porą dešimtmečių, kai pasaulyje buvo parduota 3,5 mln. knygų "Norvegiškas miškas" – skaidraus ir lengvo pamąstymo apie jaunystę ir meilę – egzempliorių, Murakami tapo populiariausiu šiuolaikiniu Japonijos rašytoju." (<http://pramogos.delfi.lt/archive/article.php?id=3210433> consulted 31st May 2011).

¹² The first ever Murakami translation was *Pinball*, 1973 in Chinese in Taiwan, before an English translation of *A Wild Sheep* in the USA and a translation of *Norwegian Wood* into Korean in 1989. Since the 1990s, the literature of Haruki Murakami has been translated in the West, with *A Wild Sheep* translated in 1995 in Poland, and in Russia in 1998. As of 2006, the literature of Murakami has been translated in about 40 countries (Yomota and Numano et al. 2006: 32-33).

USA, the contemporary sensibility of Murakami's literature attracts Americans (*Asahi Shinbun*, evening edition October 3rd 2005).

And Haruki Murakami himself analyses the popularity of his literature beyond Japan as follows:

I often heard a similar reaction on the part of readers around the world: "I don't know, but I understand very well. I could not systematically criticise the intrigue of Murakami's novel, but I could very really feel it." What I will say is only a hypothesis, but it seems to me that my novels are read everywhere where a kind of social chaos reigns. That is, Japan is a kind of *avant-garde* of social chaos, and the Japanese live in chaos and contradiction feeling them as very natural (*Asahi Shinbun*, evening edition October 3rd 2005).

As the journalist Sachiko Yuri remarked, "since the 1980s and 1990s, the social frame and religious norm of Russia and the Occident have started to be unsteady, although post-war Japanese society was already without norms and full of contradiction" (*Asahi Shinbun*, evening edition October 3rd 2005). If we also think about the Lithuanian context, the abrupt changes in the social framework first after independence in 1991, and again after entry to the European Union in 2004, would permit Lithuanian readers to share the sentiments of the characters of Murakami Haruki's novels. The literature of Murakami does not directly deal directly with Lithuanian social problems, as did that of Kobo Abe. But the translation of the two Japanese novelists, who could be considered the most popular in Lithuania, does not present the traditionally stereotyped image of Japan, for example geishas or samurai.

It is true we will have to investigate further as part of this research into the Lithuanian reader's ideas about Murakami. However, I would like to present what a Lithuanian reader of Murakami said: "Perhaps, in his fictional universe, we do not feel Japanese culture, at least, not directly: there is neither geisha nor samurai – I think that that's why the Murakami work is understandable and near for the Occidental reader. We read his novels not because there is Japanese exoticism, but because his novels are close to us, and again very original".

As Kobo Abe gave *Moterys smėlynuose* an allegorical dimension,

permitting several interpretations, and as Haruki Murakami emphasised the emptiness of a capitalist country where social chaos was felt as the emptiness each reader lives, the literature of Kobo Abe and of Haruki Murakami could be received as culturally odourless allegories of the contemporary problems of their readers, in Lithuania as in other countries. Or, as Murakami said himself, this social chaos as emptiness could be considered as a contemporary image of Japan. Would foreign readers search for this new Japaneseness in Murakami's world?

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

We could say that the choice of Japanese literature selected for translation in Lithuania has been made for different reasons according to the period. During the Soviet period, books corresponded to socialist values and could be by a reputed novelist like Yasunari Kawabata, or a novelist whose novel constitutes an allegory of the social problems of socialist countries (Kobo Abe in 1960), while a book written by a Japanese extreme leftist writer was translated in the 1950s. After independence, in particular around the time of entry to the European Union, the literature of Haruki Murakami was translated in Lithuania, which could have been caused by his popularity in the West.

It is true that translations of Japanese literature have existed since the Soviet period. However, it is possible to say that the translation of Japanese literature in Lithuania has been influenced by the social power of each period (from Soviet power to Western capitalist power), and that these translations could not always be said to construct accurate imagery of Japan. Whether or not the world constructed in Murakami's literature was culturally indifferent or not, his literature permits each reader to reflect on their contemporary problems. For the future, I would like to continue to research this theme, garnering the views of Lithuanian literary critics and interviewing Lithuanian readers and publishers.

PRINCIPAL LIST OF REFERENCES

- Donald Keen, 2004. "Hihiyô 「批評」 [comments]" In *SUNA NOONNA* 『砂の女』 [*The Woman in the Dunes*], Kobo Abe, Tokyo : Shinchobunko 269.
- Shinichiro Nakayama, 1978. "Kaisetsu 「解説」 [commentary]" In *Abe Kobo* (pp. 372-378), Tokyo : Shichosha.
- Shoichi Saeki, 1994. "Kokusaika no paradokusu 「国際化のパラドックス」 [Paradox of the internationalisation]" IN *Abe Kobo* 『阿部公房』 (pp. 97-103), Tokyo : Shinchosa.
- Cécile Sakai, 2011. "The Reception of Japanese Literature in France: Major Trends and Perspectives" (pp. 37-48) in *Japan as represented in European media* (ed. Kyoko Koma), Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University.
- Arunas Streikus 2007. "Sovietinė literatūros ir meno cenzūra Lietuvoje 1944-1955 m." (<http://www.lkdte.lt/lkdte/aktualijos/archyvas/2007/7.6/38.pdf>) consulté au 1 juillet.
- Shinsuke Tani, 1978. "AbeKobo nenpyô 「阿部公房年表」[the chronologie of Kobo Abe]" IN *Abe Kobo* 『阿部公房』 (pp.103-108), Tokyo : Shinchosa.
- Inuhiko Yomota, Mituyoshi Numano et al. 2006. *Sekai wa Murakami Haruki wo do yomuka* 『世界は村上春樹をどう読むか』 [How the world read Haruki Murakami], Tokyo :Bungeishunju.
- Jūratė Žuolytė, "Gyvenimas Vagoje Prieš 65 metus ir dabar" (<http://www.diena.lt/dienrastis/tema/gyvenimas-vagoje-pries-65-metus-ir-dabar-270708>) consulted on May 31th 2011.
- The Kawabata Foundation information (<http://www.kawabata-kinenkai.org/nenpyo.html>) consulted on June 30th 2011.