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**RESEARCH PAPER**

# Subversive imagology of the ecoscape: an ecocritical analysis of Ibuse Masuji's Kakitsubata (1951) and Taguchi Randy's Zōn ni te (2013)

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**Abstract:** The relationship between Japanese people and nature is one of a strong bond in several respects. On the one hand, the symbiotic relationship between the Japanese and Japan's natural environment has shaped cultural aspects of the philosophical and religious matrix, such as the *Shintō* and Buddhist rituals. On the other hand, the unpredictable character of nature manifests in earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods that have characterized the country for centuries. Eventually, in the global imagination, Japan is associated with cherry blossoms or autumn foliage, expressing an aesthetics of life's fragility in its fleeting passage. This image metaphorically describes nature as both friendly and hostile. What happens when this image is subverted by anthropogenic interference that corrupts the ecosystem and its connection with human beings? Radioactive contamination has troubled Japan twice. First, the double atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki annihilated the topography of the two cities. More recently, the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi turned a flourishing agricultural region into a graveyard of radioactive waste. Nevertheless, literature gives us evidence of nature fighting back. In *Kakitsubata* (1951), Ibuse Masuji portrays a crazy iris, blooming out of season. With *Zōn ni te* (2013), Taguchi Randy presents a revitalized nature, more thriving than ever, despite the soil contamination surrounding the nuclear power plant. This contribution adopts an ecocritical perspective to analyze an alternative view of the Japanese seasonal imagery depicted in literature. The aim is to investigate how the imagology that associates Japan with a sublime, untouched country (*jitsuzō*) is far from the truth of a contaminated environment (*jittai*) which struggles to restore its unspoiled sublimity.

**Keywords:** *Satoyama; Ecoscape; Catastrophe, Ecocriticism; Contemporary Japanese Literature; Atomic Bombing; Nuclear Accident*

## Introduction

The relationship between Japanese people and nature is a strong bond in several respects. In Japan, human activities and social practices such as religious, aesthetic, and ideological praxis of everyday life are naturally inscribed in the cycle of the four seasons resulting in a highly encoded representation of nature (Shirane, 2013, p. XII). According to Shirane, the Japanese's deep sensitivity towards the environment and seasonal changing has been influenced by the country's particular agricultural heritage, climate and geography (2013, p. XII) was recently as been defined as 'ecoscape'.

This long-standing and close affinity with nature has been grasped as an exotic element abroad. In the global imagination, Japan is associated with *hanami* 花御 (cherry blossoms) or *momijigari* 紅葉狩り (autumn foliage), expressing in an aesthetic image the fragility of life in its fleeting passage. These images evoke the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* ものの哀れ, demanding awareness for the ephemeral quality of life:

> *Haga sees one of the unique features of the Japanese people (nation) as their love and respects for nature, which, he believes, distinguishes them from Westerners, who lack this attitude and who fight with and attempt to conquer nature* (2013, p. 6).

The relationship between man and nature, so often represented in traditional Japanese rituals and arts, was observed with admiration and imported to the West as the country's cultural icon. This exotic imagery served as a source of fascination for European literati and merchants of the 18-19th centuries so much that they enhanced an artistic current, that of *Japonisme*, capable of seducing, among others, Van Gogh and Degas.

About a century later, this process of representing otherness through more or less stereotyped images found critical interest and gave birth to the critical approach known as 'imagology'. The target of criticism was no more the figurative arts but the literary product as a descriptive source of those images of alterity.

Eventually, the iconic description of *hanami and momijigari* represents an example of Japanese aesthetic imagery retrieved in seasonal changing that metaphorically describes nature as friendly and hostile. The reference to death and rebirth that those two seasonal rituals implicitly implied tend to hide the unpredictable character of nature manifested in earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods that have repeatedly overwhelmed the country for centuries. Natural disasters are underrepresented in visual art since they are considered not normative, although familiar environmental or climatic manifestations. Asquith and Kalland argued:

> *(..) the nature cherished by most Japanese is not nature in its original state but in its idealized state* (quoted in Wake et al., 2018, p. 4).

What happens when this image of seasonal change in Japan is subverted by anthropogenic interference that corrupts the ecosystem and its symbiotical living with human beings? Through the analysis of Ibuse Masuji and Taguchi Randy's selected works, this study aims at underlining not-normative perceptions of seasonal change in Japan, thus producing self-images which testify to the corruption of the environment and the human/nature bonds as well. On the one hand, the iris which blooms out of season in Ibuse's *Kakitsubata* (1951) probes the irrationality of technological advancement that led to the atomic annihilation; that irrationality is mirrored by the unnatural blooming of the iris. On the other hand, Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* (2013) portrays the revenge of nature that flourishes undisturbedly after the evacuation of the surrounding area of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The research aim is to investigate how the (subversive) imagology emerging from the description of an abnormal seasonal change alters Japanese aesthetics associated with natural phenomena and its representation in literature.

The research approach is then twofold: ecocriticism sheds light on the symbiotic relationship between Japanese cultural tradition, nature and seasonal changing. This approach becomes crucial when dealing with apocalyptic scenarios such as the atomic annihilation and the nuclear catastrophe at the core of the testimonial narratives here analysed since "apocalypticism both responds to and produces 'crisis'" thus enabling "our evaluation of it as an ecocritical trope" (Greg, 2012, p. 94). At the same time, a psychopathological perspective related to the radioactive discourse soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear fallout highlights the cost of invisible contamination responsible for the corruption of the environment as well as the rupture of human relationship with natural elements.

After discussing the notions of (subversive) imagology and ecoscape, this study will turn its attention to the analysis of Ibuse Masuji's *Kakitsubata* and Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* to verify how testimonial narratives about radioactive contamination may be successful in overturning the self-image of the harmonious Japanese ecoscape. In doing so, the article moves a step forward in the imagology study, considering how corrupted self-images are the result of the anthropogenic degradation they denounce.

**(Subversive) Imagology of *Satoyama***

Imagology (literally: 'image studies', from the French *imagologie*) gained popularity in France during the Fifties thanks to the Belgian scholar Hugo Dyserinck who coined the term to identify a comparative approach to investigating intercultural relations regarding mutual perceptions, images, and self-images. It consists of an interdisciplinary viewpoint that aims to underline the artistic representation of cultural traits, thus involving anthropological and cultural dimensions (habits and customs, religious practices). For this reason, imagology refers to the field of comparative literature.

With the demand for a definition of World Literature, the imagology perspective was implemented as an interpretative paradigm of a multicultural reality based on exchanges, connections, mutual influences and reception rules, thus promoting the passage to a global (transnational) literary production.

As Soulas-de Russel stated, the imagology "allows us to clearly isolate the stereotypes conveyed, spread more or less consciously by the texts of all literature" (Soulas-de Russel, 2016, p. 3).[3] In other words, the imagology enables the analysis of cultural image of the alterity enhancing the act of recognising self and other's identity.

Sometimes, such images are self-produced and acquire a double semantic value. On one hand, they nurture a particular aesthetic or socio-political vision of national identity; in this sense, the image is subdued to political powers. On the other hand, self-image may be the conscious choice of artistic production to respond the requests and tastes of the foreign public; in this case, the image is overwhelmed by marketing rules. In any case, they are "self-images based on the principle of national and cultural belonging", which involves a process of (self) identification of the subject/community "sometimes starting from hetero-images" (Proietti, 2008, p. 117). Proietti specifies,

> *Literary 'self-images' would, therefore, be denotative of the mental processes to which humans appeal when referring to concepts such as 'homeland' or 'nation,' through which they satisfy their desire to belong and to affirm their identity* (2008, pp. 117-18).

That is why adopting an imagological perspective implies a deep knowledge of the ethnic milieu of reference. Moreover, when national images are distorted, we speak, in the imagological field, of "mirages" (2008, p. 108).

As an interpretive model, imagology advocates overcoming fixed cultural categories and grids stemming from culture-specific traits often devalued or criticized as stereotypes and cliches. For the risks of misinterpreting literary representations of individuals and society with an authorial bias towards writing, the reliability of imagology as an approach to literary criticism is still debated.

Since this study intends to adopt the perspective of imagology studies to investigate the traditional relationship between humans and nature in Japan as represented in two post-disaster testimonial narratives, the ecocritical approach also becomes essential. In this sense, it is necessary to start with a definition of ecoscape, which, in Japan, finds its closest correspondence with the concept of *satoyama*.

According to an urban ecology perspective, the term 'ecoscape' refers to the complex interplay between human and non-human factors in a built environment (Rhine, 2018, p. 23). The ecoscaping practice aims at maintaining the ecological balance of the environment by minimally impacting its biodiversity while intervening with sustainable architectures and infrastructures for human needs. For these reasons, this definition of ecoscape finds an example in the Japanese ecosystem known as *satoyama* 里山 (literally: village surrounded by mountains), a paradigm that, according to Shirane, roots back in the mid-to-late Heian period (Shirane, 2013, p. 13). Different from the *yamazato* 山

[3] "It allows us to clearly isolate the stereotypes conveyed and spread by the texts of all literature, more or less consciously". (Translation by the author)

*里*, the romanticised mountain village of *waka* and court literature, the S*atoyama* is strongly connected with agricultural activities and the seasonal changing (Shirane, 2013, p. 17):

> *A major characteristic of Satoyama landscape, with its farm village near a river at the base of a mountain, was the belief that gods resides in different aspects of nature and that birds and animals served as intermediaries between this world and the other world of gods and the dea, which existed in and beyond the mountain* (ibid. 2013, p. 21).

According to the author, this is the source for the widespread custom of cherry-blossom viewing and the interest in the *meisho* *名所* (literally: 'famous places' Shirane, 2013, p. 23). *Satoyama* promotes and maintains biodiversity and sustainable living for the village community. 40% of Japanese land can be described as *satoyama*, or its variant *satoumi* *里海* in the case the village is located near the sea (Yuki, 2018, p. 131). This is why it becomes a source to interpret the anthropogenic intervention that disrupts this hypothetically ideal ecosystem and to investigate its enviro-socio-political issues.

The study now turns its attention to analyzing the two proposed works according to the comparative approach of imagology studies. The purpose is to highlight how both testimonial narratives portray an ecoscape devastated by nuclear contamination, thus emphasizing the rupture between the now corrupted *satoyama* and its ideal, aesthetic representation. In doing so, the investigation also strengthens the the role of psychological trauma in dealing with that environmental degradation.

**Ibuse Masuji and *Kakitsubata***

As a writer, Ibuse Masuji received several awards, including the Noma Prize (for *Black Rain*) and the Order of Cultural Merit in 1966. The author became internationally known in the Sixties for his *Kuroi ame* 『*黒い雨*』("Black Rain", 1965), then transposed into an award-winning film by Imamura Shōhei in 1989. The story is a fictional account of a family that survived Hiroshima. However, the narrator takes advantage of the actual diary by the *hibakusha* *被爆者* (a-bomb survivor) Shigematsu Shizuma to denounce discrimination towards the victims of the atomic bombing and their struggle to re-establishing everyday life after the atomic-bombing experience. The novel presents a common topos in the *genbaku bungaku*「*原爆文学*」(literature of the atomic bomb) as to say the discrimination towards the survivors. The protagonist, Yasuko, is rejected by her future husband, concerned about her exposure to the black rain that followed the drop of the Little Boy bomb in Hiroshima.

Eventually, long before the international success of *Kuroi ame*, the author committed to the same theme with *Kakitsubata*『*かきつばた*』(The Crazy Iris), first published in the literary review *Chūōkōron* 『*中央公論*』in 1951.

The novel opens as follows:

> *Shortly after Hiroshima was bombed, I was at friend's house in the outskirts of Fukuyama looking at an iris which had flowered out of season. It grew alone and its blossoms were purple. This was in the middle of August, some days after the Imperial Rescript of Surrender* (Ibuse, 1984, p. 17).

The plot is set in Fukuyama, about 100 km from Hiroshima, and a flashback returns the narration on 6 August 1945. The short story lasts only twenty pages and seems to subvert logical rules: American leaflets and handbills dropped from the sky warn citizens to evacuate to Hiroshima, considered a safer city than Fukuyama; everything but the food is very cheap in the shops.

Only thirty or forty hours after the atomic event, the protagonist - a male voice from Tōkyō - hears about the Hiroshima nuclear blast. The first survivors took refuge in Fukuyama, reporting the new weapon and the strange injuries it provoked. Following

Emperor Hirohito's surrender speech on the radio - the so-called *gyokuon-hōsō* 玉音放送 broadcasted on 15 August - many citizens complained of stomach-ache and other psychosomatic symptoms. The protagonist decides to return to the capital, and while at a friend's house at Fukuyama's outskirts, they discover a corpse in the pond one morning. The circularity of the narration concludes the short story with the image of a half-crazy, drowned girl who had experienced the Hiroshima atomic bombing with her family. The irises are all clustered at one end of the pond, and one flower is in bloom:

> *At the mouth of the gulley was clustered the main group of irises; a few feet away grew the angular leaves from whose recess emerged the twisted stem with its belated purple flowers. The petals looked hard and crinkly […]*
>
> *"Do you think they were frightened into bloom?" I said.*
>
> *"It's extraordinary," said Kiuchi. "I've never heard of an iris flowering this late. It must have gone crazy! […] The iris blooming is crazy and it belongs to a crazy age."* (Ibuse, 1984, pp. 34-35)

The mention to the "crazy age" refers to the atomic age. The promise of prosperity, a direct result of technological advancement, is disillusioned by the brutality of the atomic event that is perpetuated not once but twice. It is the defeat of humanity as long as it highlights the limits of human intellect submitted to a process of self-destruction. According to Treat, the displacement of the entire story to Fukuyama and its outskirts enables the author to give "considerable thought to the problems of representing, accurately and ethically, an atrocity which one is guiltily spared" (Treat, 1995, p. 279).

In *Kakitsubata*, the atomic bomb, whose explosion is usually associated with the image of a mushroom cloud, overlaps with an iris in full bloom. A subversive representation is put in place in the short story, overturning the *mono no aware* usually linked to awakening of nature and now related to death.

There is also another level of interpretation of the crazy iris that refers to the *hanakotoba* 花言葉 - the symbolic language of flowers: iris stands for strength and vitality. It is considered protection from typhoons and storms, especially in the Japanese countryside. All extended discourse on the iris is, *imagologically* speaking, a reference to force and resilience. Eventually, in portraying an iris which booms out of season, the story counterbalances the oxymoron between the vigour of the iris and the weakness of the *hibakusha*.

Moreover, the *hanakotoba* comes into play a second time in the figure of the suddenly insane young woman who finds death by drowning in the pond at the family of the protagonist's friend. Women are usually referred to as *hana* 花 - flowers - in Japanese poetic language. The image of the girl overlaps with that of the iris again, but this time both are crazy (unnatural) in the sense that her dead body is not as full of life as it should be, while the iris, supposedly hibernating in that season, triumphs in colour. The narrative questions the implementation of nuclear power: the young woman would not have committed suicide if the atomic bombing had not been released (Natsume, 1995, p. 27); at the same time, her suicide foreshadows a possible suicide (annihilation) of all humanity, which the atomic weapon has made possible (Natsume, 1995, p. 33).

Similarly, in *Kuroi ame*, in which rain, as to say, water - synonymous with life - was dyed black, indicative of its corruption in the form of radioactive and therefore deadly contamination.

These examples portray a not normative representation of 'self-image' (of water, iris, woman) that imagology reads as subversive because corrupted by the radioactivity contamination of the environment, thus predicting death due to the *genbakushō* 原爆症 (radiation sickness) in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. Moreover, radioactivity is also a prerequisite for discrimination and social rejection. In this sense, the writing inquiries the "nuclear morality" (Sato, 1995, p. 2) of technological advancement.

Several years after the publication of *Kakitsubata*, Ibuse insists on the subversive value acquired by certain familiar and common natural elements, repurposed in a non-normative key due to anthropogenic human intervention. The analysis of this imagological subversion restores centrality to the degeneration of nature as expressed by the author in an exercise of self-representation (self-image) sharply at odds with the usual and established semantic value: "The return of figure disfigures the disfiguration of concepts by reinscribing the imago in the midst of the logos" (Shiota, 2017).

Decades after the double atomic bombings, Japan experienced the three-fold catastrophe of the Tōhoku in 2011, bringing to light ancient fears of the misuse of nuclear energy due to the mismanagement at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The following paragraph analyzes a short story describing the environmental changes around the plant contaminated by the radioactive fallout. The imagology studies are a key research tool that highlights *satoyama*'s transformation and reception in the testimonial narrative.

**Taguchi Randy and *Zōn ni te***

Taguchi Randy is a contemporary Japanese writer whose popularity has overcome Japanese national boundary to reach a broader audience, thanks also to her engagement in the social media. Several novels have been transposed into movies, starting from *Sora no ana* 『空の花』("Hole in the Sky") by Kazuyoshi Kumakiri (2001) and the world-wide popular *Konsento* 『コンセント』("Outlet", 2000) by Shun Nakahara (2001) and *Antena* 『アンテナ』("Antenna", 2001) by Kazuyoshi Kumakiri again (2003). These last two novels are part of a trilogy - together with *Mozaiku* 『モザイク』("Mosaic", 2001).

*Zōn ni te* 『ゾーンにて』was published in the review *Ouru yomimono* 『御売る読み物』in November 2011 and then included in the homonymous anthology in 2013 (Schmiedel, 2021, p. 350). The short story focuses on the meeting of the writer Hatori Yōko with Kudō Ken'ichi, a man in his fifties who evacuated the area surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. For the record, the second chapter of the collection entitled *Umibe ni te* 『海辺にて』("On the seashore") features what critics consider the second part of the story, published for the first time in January 2012 (Slaymaker, 2020, p. 484).

Ken'ichi is an evacuee who returns home once or twice a month to care for his fold. On this occasion, he usually drives people interested in approaching the off-limit zone of Fukushima Daiichi.

On their road trip among the ghost towns of Minamisoma and Ōkuma, Yōko gains awareness of the implications radioactivity has had for the ecoscape (Schmiedel, 2021, p. 351). The small ghost towns near the Fukushima Daiichi power plants responded to this definition before the nuclear crisis compromised that delicate balance. In Japanese, these towns could be described as an example of *satoyama* before radioactive contamination disrupted their integrity. Yōko and Ken'ichi occasionally stop at farms, but the area has transformed into open-air graveyards for animals: "My heart beat fast to the words 'into the zone'. We're going into the zone now, and it's like a SF movie" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 29).

The estrangement feeling perceived by Yōko stems from the consciousness that the nuclear accident had transformed Fukushima "from a satoyama utopia to a nuclear dystopia" (Yuki, 2013, p. 58). Before 11 March 2011, Fukushima symbolized technological advancement and economic prosperity. The nuclear accident destroyed the stereotype of Japan as a country of coexistence and symbiotic equilibrium between the ecosystem and humanity. The *satoyama* - as to say, the untouched woodland surrounding the populated area of Fukushima - turned into a corrupted environment due to radioactivity contamination of air and soil:

> *Prior to the nuclear accident and radioactive contamination, Fukushima had long been famous for its production of high-quality rice, meat, vegetables, and fruit. In fact, the prefecture of Fukushima was, and still is, eager to tout its region as Satoyama [emphasis mine], publicizing it is a good destination for tourists* (2013, p. 57).

The tourist popularity of *Satoyama* is questioned after the nuclear fallout. The agricultural and dairy products of that land were no more commercialised on the domestic markets. Moreover, the dispersion of radioactivity substances in the air and the water of the Pacific Ocean after the nuclear accident turn the nuclear catastrophe into a global concern, thus changing the image of Japan forever. No more a safe country, a symbol of equilibrium between tradition and progress, but an unstable nation incapable of tackling the crisis.

A new geo-cultural space took over the *satoyama*: the off-limit zone. This evacuation area is also a liminal, transitional boundary, a limbo between life and death characterised by ambiguity[4]. Yōko comments: "Here is a sort of halfway to the world of the dead. A suspended place, it is somehow nostalgic" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 65). The mention of the zone's ambivalence is interesting since uncertainty is one of the characteristics of environmental contaminants. In Fukushima's case, the radioactivity released into the atmosphere and the radioactive waste disposal became a crucial concern, contributing to the corruption of *satoyama*'s equilibrium.

According to Veyner, the uncertain character of any contamination finds expression in three main factors: 1) exposure uncertainty, 2) etiological uncertainty, and 3) diagnostic uncertainty (1988, p. 59). The so-called 'exposure uncertainty' forces Yōko to check the Geiger counter repeatedly during her trip in the off-limit zone. It is also the main source for radiophobia, as to say, the 'radiation anxiety' which permeates the testimonial accounts soon after the nuclear fallout. It implies psychopathological sequelae often associated with PTSD symptoms, even on a psychosomatic level (De Pieri, 2021).

The 'etiological uncertainty' refers to the unfeasibility of recognizing the origins of possible radiation symptoms since the ARS, the acronym for 'acute radioactive syndrome', may manifest with signs of fatigue or uneasiness whose etiopathogenesis is of difficult determination. Last but not least, the 'diagnostic uncertainty' underlines the arduous prediction of the prognosis, which is generally reserved. Vyner adds the 'boundary uncertainty' to this list: "When a governmental institution declares that within a certain boundary, conditions are dangerous; but beyond that boundary, conditions are safe" (Vyner, 1988, p. 59). In Yōko's words: "At the end of this street, there's the hazard area. Here is the provisional area for evacuation emergence. That is the no-trespassing area. Here is the real world" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 66). The author herself considered the zone as "an indeterminate, mysterious place" (Taguchi quoted in Yuki, 2015, p. 93). Hence, an overlapping of the female figures is at stake in the story: Yōko has written a novel about radioactivity as well, and both Yōko and Taguchi demonstrated a complicated relationship to radiation and reporting (Slaymaker, 2020, p. 484).

In *Zōn ni te* traditional imagery of the Japanese landscape is subdued to double upheavals. First, Taguchi portrays a subversive image of Fukushima's *satoyama*: the off-limit area is a no-man land where the surviving cattle and pets are dying slowly and painfully. At the same time, the writer re-establishes the traditional image of an untouched ecoscape by staging the natural revenge in the form of flourishing grass, which overwhelms the evacuated zone.

Moreover, even the promotional representation of nuclear energy - known as the 'safety myth' - underwent a radical derangement. Before 11 March, Japanese people were convinced of the safeness of nuclear energy: the self-image representing the 'peaceful atom' was subverted and dismantled by the triple catastrophe of the Tōhoku disaster. Nature revindicated its power, first by earthquake and tsunamis, last in the

[4] *chūzuri ni natta basho* 宙づりになった場所 (Taguchi, 2016, p. 65).

guise of plutonium-239 and uranium-235. These fossil materials fill the air, infiltrate the soil and settle on every object, causing their death or corruption. Only grass seems to have made a deal with the evil - the radioactivity - and it is flourishing to the point of taking possession of streets, houses, and human belongings: "I couldn't see anything ahead because luxurious vegetation was covering both sides of the narrow street" (Taguchi, 2016, p. 45), commented Yōko, the female protagonist. And again, similar expressions recur several times in the story:

> *A single street continued in the middle of the overgrown fields, or maybe it was a paddy field. It was so desolate I couldn't distinguish between a vegetable plot and a paddy field. With the disappearance of humans, it was vegetation that dominated the land. In the zone, the green seems sinister* (Taguchi, 2016, p. 63).

That prosperous vegetation reflects an ominous feeling in that its growth is exaggerated and abnormal, thus fomenting the idea that radioactivity has taken possession of it to the point of turning the greenery insane. Hence, again, spring and its awakening, rather than being associated with life, becomes a memento mori of the threatening presence of the invisible, untouchable, unnoticeable radioactivity in the area, suggesting a subversive imagology reading.

**Conclusion: an Imagology Comparison**

Through the perspective of imagology this study provided a critical reading of Ibuse Masuji's *Kakitsubata* and Taguchi Randy's *Zōn ni te* taking into consideration the subversive representation that both novels stage of the seasonal change or the traditional Japanese ecoscape.

At a domestic level, high value is placed by Japanese people on gentleness and harmony, which find performance in an idealised vision of nature (Shirane, 2013, p. 8). This research investigated the implications of representing a no more romanticised image of the natural environment, altered by anthropogenic manipulation. The assumption was that reality is reflected, replicated, or deformed by its representation, that is, by the literary image: "Images are not merely the object of study but are also the medium of thought, action and communication" (Shiota, 2017).

The ambiguity of the image is described by the continuous oscillation between signifying and figuring, between *mimesis* and *poiesis,* two poles with complementary functions. Thus, the image consists of a polysemic moment of dialogical reflection of self and others that risks falling into cliches and prejudices because of pre-constituted interpretations. Proietti considers it a "sensible presentation, comparison, metaphor" (Proietti, 2008, p. 41). *Imagotypical* structures arise from conventional and rigid models, stratified over time and shared by the typical mentality of society, and therefore image may assume connotations which are very similar to the stereotype (Proietti, 2008, p. 109).

Both the atomic bombings and Fukushima nuclear accident had a huge figurative impact on cultural practices, and they were often associated with the representation of a dystopian future. Human harm to the environment and other species to restore peace or fulfil well-being reveals the ultimate risk of preventing survival and facilitating the annihilation of living creatures instead (Haga, 2019, p. XVI).

Radioactivity contamination, as an "eco-pathological threat" (Greg, 2012, p. 105), is a crucial trope in Japanese ecocriticism, especially after the Fukushima nuclear accident. Ecocriticism, as an approach to literary criticism, not only helps restore the relationship between humans and the ecosystem but also warns about the disruptive effects of human activities (Shiota, 2017). According to Thornber:

> *…there is a resounding contradiction in east Asian aesthetic representation of 'harmonious human-nonhuman relationship' in that they do not reflect empirical reality and thereby fail to address its 'eco degradation'* (Thornber, 2012, pp. 5-6)

Although radioactivity represents an ecological as well as psychopathological threat at the core of both short stories, both literary works give relevance to earth's agency, performed in the revitalizing power of the flourishing nature. After underlining the stereotypical imagery that characterizes Japan's relationship with seasonal change and the natural environment, the research proves how these images were abruptly corrupted by anthropogenic interference: the atomic bombing and the nuclear fallout. To face these "*envirotechnical* disaster"[s] (Deichert, 2021, p. 77), an aesthetic representation of post-disaster landscapes was performed through art and literary works aiming at domesticating and acknowledging the uncertainty of radioactivity contamination. The result was artistic compromises beyond human beings, involving environmental as well as geological forces, radioactivity, animals and inanimate but contaminated objects (Deichert, 2021, p. 79).

Eventually, by regaining its predominance in the ecoscape - as *Kakitsubata* and *Zōn ni te* suggest - nature brings the discourse back to a level that is no longer anthropocentric, but ecocentric, and it is an anthropogenic intervention that has necessitated this shift in perspective: 'For imagologists, textuality emerges in force fields that disrupt traditional (Shiota, 2017). While Ibuse's *Kakitsubata* blooms out of season, thus confirming that natural power was abruptly corrupted by radiation, Taguchi's flourishing greenery blooms at the right times. It restores the ordinary flow giving room to an optimistic vision of the future. Moreover, Ibuse's production on the atomic bombings insists on the crucial role the revival of everyday routine and rituals assumes in the wake of catastrophe: as the season changes, even human beings can find resilient skills to cope with traumatic experiences and loss (Natsume, 1995, p. 28).

Beginning with idyllic imagery that equates the Japanese with the exemplary ecoscape (*jitsuzō* 実像), these novels report a different, seriously compromised reality (*jittai* 実体). However, the natural element seems to prevail over the anthropogenic one, encouraging resiliency: nature preserves its regenerative force and struggles to restore its unspoiled sublimity.

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