

In the Woods of Memory [眼の奥の森]

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In the Woods of Memory [眼の奥の森], by Medoruma Shun, translated by Takuma Sminkey. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-61172-037-2, 208 pages (paperback).

Originally published in Japan in 2009, the latest novel from Okinawan writer, activist, and poet Medoruma Shun, *In the Woods of Memory*, was published in English translation in 2017. The novel takes up the themes of memory and trauma, as it retells a tragic rape of an Okinawan village girl in the final days of the war. Each relays the events from the perspective of a particular character who each provide a slightly different perspective of the events. Other accounts of the event come fifty years later, and the novel switches between accounts of the past and present to frame the longstanding effects of the events on the psychology of all parties involved, illuminating its haunting views of the present. Medoruma writes here of an unshakable trauma, invoking both the power of literature and memory and its necessity to the Okinawan people in reclaiming both agency and power, especially as the islands struggle between the forces of American and Japan hegemonic power. While these political tensions are an object of recent news headlines over base relocations and environmental degradation at the hands of both Japanese and American decisions, Medoruma's novel attempts to forge a connection between modern Okinawa and its forgotten history to illuminate the necessity of literature as a form of struggle against forces of history which have silenced Okinawa.

Okinawan literature has been the topic of recent scholarly studies and translations and Medoruma serves as a prominent figure in the slew of contemporary writers from the southern Japanese islands. This writer garnered attention across Japan when his story "Droplets" took home the coveted Akutagawa Prize in 1997, arguably the country's highest literary honor. His writings have continued to deal with issues of the island's tumultuous history at the hands of Japanese and American rule, weaving its complex historical contours with the need to address issues of the present. After the rape of a young girl by military servicemen stationed in Okinawa made headlines and anti-base protests hit their peak in 1995, Medoruma retorted with the short story "Hope." No longer than a few paragraphs, the story nonetheless is a radical and politically charged stab at the presence of military on Okinawa. A frustrated Okinawan man kidnaps an American child outside a military base in response to the events and murders him for revenge. The act is over in moments but Medoruma spares no detail in his graphic depictions of the deed. The killer then commits self-immolation outside the gates of an American military facility in the ultimate act of protest. The writer is far from apologetic in his tone, and his protagonist sees the only logical repentance for the acts of the servicemen as a brutal slaughter of one of their own by an Okinawan. His words spare little mercy for the situation at hand and express his own frustrations and indeed, those shared by the Okinawan people. While protests continue to this day in attempts to affect the political situation and stop base movement and expansion on the already small islands, Medoruma seems to suggest that action is important, if not only through the act of writing. Here is protest itself, a possibility to foster change, to express the anger of himself and the Okinawan people, in a means that will reach beyond the islands and to a wider public. The act of writing is a way to reclaim his agency as an Okinawan at the mercy of two hegemonic powers. Hope is perhaps less a referent to the story than of the possibilities of writing as a form of revolt.

In the Woods of Memory shares a similar frustration with tensions of Okinawan-American relations but this time within the currents of both the past and the present. Medoruma places significant emphasis on history and memory in the novel, shifting back and forth between events in 1945, at the end of the war and in 2005, its 50th anniversary. The novel begins in a small Okinawan village in the wake of the Battle of Okinawa, its residents having surrendered to the occupying American forces. The villagers are wary of the presence of the soldiers and their fears are realized when a village girl, Sayoko, is raped and severely injured. The village is shocked and unable to seek out justice; the girl is scarred, physically and psychologically. A young boy in the village, Seiji, takes justice into his own hands by wielding a spear and diving into the water to seek revenge for the girl. After unsuccessfully killing the soldiers, but wounding two of them, a merciless search of the village begins by the military in an attempt to capture Seiji. These events are retold across the chapters, labeled by character and dated for the English translation, creating a complex web of information related to the events presented from each character's point of view, which often differ in tone and content. There is something of a "Rashomon effect" here, but it feels too simple to write off the author's method for telling this story as a tribute to Akutagawa Ryunosuke's short story or Akira Kurosawa's film. Rather, Medoruma seems to employ this method to suggest the widespread impact of the event on so many people, how memories have lodged into individual's consciousness and affect even those remotely connected to it. Positioned fifty years apart, the chapters also attest to the traumatic events as they have affected the present, bridging considerable temporal distance to reveal that the consequences that these injustices, these forgotten yet severely traumatic moments in history, have impacted individuals and remain painful memories that seep into the present.

Contrary to the Translator's Preface, Medoruma does not seem to simply be focusing on "how past events have impacted the present." The approach is far from a neat, linear segment. Rather, the author seems to weave the present, that is, reality itself into the *In the Woods of Memory*, offering a multidimensional narrative that intersects both time and space. Crimes of sexual violence have never waned in wake of the 1995 rape that sparked so much outcry from the public, and Medoruma's novel seems to be speaking both to the very real history of these events as well as to the fictive events of the novel.

This is complicated even further when investigating the inspiration for the writing of the novel. Medoruma is cited as coming up with the premise of this story based on his conversations with his own relatives and elders in Okinawa who experienced the war. In a way, this complicates the nature of the "novel" itself: is it fair to call a work fiction if it is patched together through undocumented, and untold facts experienced by a number of people in Okinawa? Could *In the Woods of Memory* have a place as a historical retelling of traumatic events, as a collective kind of memory of the Okinawan people that

Medoruma seems to be using fiction here in place of nonfiction, where nonfiction has been rewritten, reinterpreted and re-inscribed upon the Okinawan people. Recent controversies of the Japanese government to modify history in its textbooks, with a careful eye on erasing any injustices the imperial army conducted in the Okinawan islands is just one of numerous examples of the ways in which Okinawans have been denied a voice. Medoruma allows them to speak in this volume. He gives history a voice.