Transforming Utopia: Confinement and Identity in *Secret Rendezvous*

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In his essay, “Utopia of the Prisonhouse: A Reading of *In Darkest Tokyo” (Gokusha no yuutopia)*, Maeda Ai traces the development of prison systems in Japan and Europe and shows how their development intersects with literary and philosophical ideas of utopia. According to Ai, both prisons and literary utopias are closed spaces that are designed to function as self-contained communities based on the principles of urban design. Through his investigation of literary texts, Ai shows that by separating the individual from the external community, the prisoner is forced to retreat into his own internal world, which has the paradoxical effect of freeing his imagination. Although Ai does not address Kobo Abe’s work, confinement is a recurring theme in works such as, *The Woman in the Dunes* [*Suna no onna*]*, The Ark Sakura* [*Hakobune sakura maru*], and *The Box Man* [*Hako otoko*]. These works all feature protagonists who are willingly or unwillingly trapped in physically confining spaces. But the kind of imprisonment that Ai talks about is best illustrated in Abe’s novel, *Secret Rendezvous* [*Mikkai*]. Abe creates a figurative prison in the form of a labyrinthine hospital buried underground. The hospital entraps and destroys the nameless narrator who searches for his abducted wife. Abe portrays an institution where patients are prisoners. It is far more nightmarish than anything Ai envisioned. It is an institution that corrupts human nature and breaks down the individual. The internal liberation that Ai writes about can only exist as long as the individual retains his identity, but the narrator of *Secret Rendezvous* loses even this*.* Abe’s vision transforms Ai’s conception of the utopian prison into a dystopian one where the individual is restricted in both body and spirit.

*Secret Rendezvous* tells the story of a man whose wife is suddenly escorted to the hospital one morning. The man follows closely behind and discovers that she has vanished from the waiting room, somehow disappearing into the hospital. The narrator begins a quest to find his wife in the seemingly endless corridors of the building but is repeatedly misled by the hospital staff. In order to find his wife, he takes a job as the chief of security and instead uncovers a number of bizarre sexual experiments conducted by the doctors of the hospital. He attempts to save one of the patients, a young girl who has a condition that causes her to slowly melt away, but his rescue attempt only worsens her condition. He is unable to find his wife or escape from the hospital and ends up deep underground watching the girl dissolve while he waits to die.

The underground hospital in *Secret Rendezvous* shares all the traits of Ai’s definition of prison as an “alternative city created by state power through the inversion of the urban and which is inserted into the womb of the city.” (22) The hospital is a large urban space which functions as a self-contained community. Not only does it exist within the city, it extends into it. The boundaries of the hospital are never made clear, and the narrator indicates that houses, stores, and offices outside the building may all be part of the complex. The institution is a hospital in name only. Although its inmates have committed no crime, the hospital staff ensure that they are too weak and dependent to leave. Rather than treat the patients, the doctors conduct experiments, robbing them of their humanity and turning them into technological hybrids. Both prisons and hospitals aim to rehabilitate the individual, but there is no healing in *Secret Rendezvous.* The hospital is a dystopian institution that materializes fears of human frailty. It is a space of confinement, both for the patients being experimented on and for the narrator himself who enters the hospital and never leaves.

In a sense, the narrator’s confinement is a voluntary one, as it is his commitment to finding his wife that keeps him trapped. He is never able to confirm her fate, and her absence hangs over the entire text. Susan Napier writes about this absence in her book, *The Fantastic in Modern* *Japanese Literature*. Napier believes that the symbol of the absent woman in postwar Japanese literature represents a modern disconnect between the sexes. Women were once a symbol of domestic security and peace, but this changed in the post-war period. She writes, “Women no longer offer any sort of refuge; instead they are part of the web of entrapment which modern society appears to be weaving around its citizens.” (55) Male protagonists in post-war literature are unable to find security in the home, and women are either menacing, or in works like *Secret Rendezvous*, absent. The narrator’s hopeless search for his wife is a search for the lost security of the home. Without his wife, there is no home to which he can return, and he is left stranded in the hospital.

Further evidence of a disconnect between the sexes is evident in the experiments carried out within the hospital. Most of the men who carry out these experiments are not test subjects themselves. Instead, they use technology to control women sexually and reduce their own role to that of voyeurs. They are not victims of abuse like the women they experiment on, but by altering the sexual act and diminishing their own role in it, they are also punishing themselves. Sexual intercourse establishes a relational identity between two people, the self and the other. However, the doctors use technology to restrict, control, and alter human sexuality. Just as a prison isolates an individual from the external world, they isolate man from woman. The divide created by these experiments proves to be irreversible.

Towards the end of the text, the hospital holds a celebration to mark the anniversary of the hospital’s founding. As part of this celebration, several women compete to see who can have the most orgasms while attached to various mechanical devices and electrodes. The sexual act becomes a spectator sport where men look on, monitoring the competition and placing bets. One of the women resembles the narrator’s wife, but he refuses to confirm her identity. He accepts that even if this is his wife, she is no longer the same woman. In fact, one of the doctors informs him that the woman is suffering from a condition called “personality forfeiture”[*jinkakuhouki*]:

She had a mild brain concussion. When she came to, she suddenly found herself surrounded by a circle of white-masked men. As a matter of fact, it was nothing but an ordinary examining room, but your wife jumped to the conclusion that she was going to be gang-raped. Rape delusion, you see, is a defensive arousal mechanism for escaping from the fear of rape. (171-72)

She has renounced her identity in order to endure the horrors of the hospital. The only way for her to survive is to become someone else. This renders the narrator’s journey hopeless. The woman he is looking for no longer exists, and with nowhere else to go, he retreats deep into bowels of the hospital.

Although his decision to turn away from his wife at the end of the story marks the narrator’s final defeat, his destruction begins much earlier in the text when he takes a job working in the hospital. As chief of security, he discovers that the hospital contains countless microphones used as surveillance, and his job is to listen through each day’s recordings. There are so many microphones that listening to all of the tapes is impossible. Although, seemingly given a position of authority by the assistant director, his freedom starts to diminish. He is unable to catch up to the present and the more he tries to find his wife, the further he gets from her. He writes, “No matter how I follow myself around, I will never see anything but my own backside, when what I want to know about lies beyond . . . the space that ever since has grown endlessly wider, separating my wife and me . . . ” (pg. 37). Despite his best efforts, the narrator’s wife is always out of reach. Technology traps the narrator in time and widens the gap between him and his wife. The longer he spends reviewing the past, the more alienated he becomes from the present. This alienation is further compounded by the reports that the assistant director forces him to file.

It is the narrator himself that refuses to leave, but much of his suffering is a result of the assistant director’s interference. The assistant director attempts to consolidate his power within the prison primarily by asserting his sexual dominance. In order to do this, he must first overcome his impotence. With the help of doctors he grafts the lower body of another man onto his own torso, giving him a second penis and two additional legs. He is successful in turning himself into a symbol of sexual prowess, but only by becoming something other than human. His insistence that the narrator refer to him as “the horse” [*uma*], an obvious symbol of sexual potency, affirms this transformation. Seeking to maintain control over the hospital and its population, he begins a campaign to destroy the narrator.

The story of *Secret Rendezvous* is told in the form of a series of notebooks in both first and third person. The book opens with the narrator explaining that the assistant director has instructed him to refer to himself in third person. The narrator is suspicious of the assistant director’s request, but ultimately accepts it, even going so far as to apologize when he lapses into the first person. The protagonist goes from being “I” [*boku*] into “he” [*kare*]. The assistant director is using his authority to isolate the narrator from himself, creating a distance between the narrator’s new identity within the hospital and his past self. The duty of listening to the surveillance tapes kept the narrator isolated from the present, but the forced removal of the narrator’s identity from his own story makes the past equally uncertain and inaccessible.

Ai writes about the significance of personal identity within a prison system. He cites Martin Buber’s work about pairs of relational words, such as “I-It” and “I-Thou”. Ai explains that the “I-It” dyad is used to differentiate our subjective experiences from the external world, while “I-Thou” represents the individual’s relationship to other people. Ai writes, “The profoundest meaning of the ‘prison’ that holds the ‘I’ captive is to be found in [the] self that has been sundered from the community of the plural pronoun.” (60) What Ai doesn’t account for is the prison that seeks to destroy the individual altogether. The ultimate confinement in *Secret Rendezvous* is not the separation of the self from the other, although this does happen; it’s the imprisonment and gradual destruction of the narrator’s own consciousness. By restricting the narrator’s use of “I”, the assistant director succeeds in internalizing the prison within the narrator’s own mind.

The beginning of the third and last notebook marks a change in narration. The reader is told that, unlike the previous two books, this one is the truth. While casting the events of the previous two thirds of the book into doubt, this also establishes the third book as more honest account of his experiences. He switches back to the use of the first person and announces that this notebook will be an “indictment”; however, it comes too late. When he turns away from the woman who may be his wife, he is acknowledging that he no longer has a relationship with her. They have ceased to be husband and wife and instead, have become individual parts of the dystopian hospital. He wants to reach out to someone outside of the hospital but admits, “I have no idea yet, whom I can possibly get to read it . . .” (103). It would seem that the narrator is fighting against his imprisonment, but without an audience, the fight is ineffectual. The switch back to the first person isn’t a successful reaffirmation of his own identity; it’s a last failed attempt to hold on to it.

Without access to the past or present, the narrator focuses on the young girl he rescued from the hospital. The girl becomes representative of the security he lost when his wife disappeared, but it’s a fleeting security. She has grown weaker throughout the book, and by the end she is almost gone. He clings to the girl as she disintegrates into nothingness. Longing for any sort of real human interaction, she begs to be touched, and finally says nothing at all. She is his last hope of companionship, but she can no longer respond. He is already alone. Worse, he no longer even has a self. The dystopia of the modern world has succeeded in breaking him. As Napier writes, “his quest leads not to self-knowledge but ultimately self-defeat.” (73)

Ai ends his essay with a discussion of Tohoku’s *My Prison* [*Waga rougaku*]. In this text the prisoner has created an internalized prison that isolates him from other people but lets him reflect on the past. The narrator of *My Prison* is no longer a part of the external world, but he is still able to find peace in his memories. There is no such peace in *Secret Rendezvous*. Ai’s spiritual liberation cannot exist, because the urban space internalized by the narrator is a dystopian one that robs him of his very self. Unlike the narrator of Tohoku’s work, who is free to cast his mind back to the past, there is no freedom for the narrator of *Secret Rendezvous*. Eventually he concludes, “I find it impossible however, to accept such a thing as a past which has not yet begun.” (178) Time is gone, as is his place in it. All that is left is the inevitability of death which the narrator waits for alone.

Here the Japanese text differs from the translation. The final lines of the translated *Secret Rendezvous* draw attention to his isolation and impending demise: “I continue certainly to die. Embracing a secret rendezvous for one . . .” (179) However, the original Japanese text contains a line after this excerpt. The original *Mikkai* draws attention to the act of writing itself, “Soko kara, *mata tsugi no atarashii sakuhin ga kakareru koto ni naru to iu no darouka.”* (254) [I wonder if I will be able to write another new entry.] Although this omission is minor, the original text chooses to focus on his writing which has become the last vestige of his identity. The author wants write more, but he realizes that he is too weak, and his inability to continue signifies the final dissolution of self-identity.

Ai writes, “If utopian literature is the product of an intense vision to materialize human happiness within a closed and organized space, it perhaps maintains, at the deepest level, an analogical relationship to the mechanism of power that is the prison.” (21) *Secret Rendezvous* does not contradict Ai’s essay, but it does present a different conception of prison. The prison takes the form of a public institution which has been defiled. This is still a highly organized urban space, but there is no room for freedom of the imagination. Technological control and sexual dominance confine and destroy the individual both physically and spiritually. As the narrator’s self gradually erodes, the past, present, and future join together, making even imaginary retreat into memories or hopes impossible.

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