The Role of Landscape in Depicting Environmental Impact and Trauma: A Comparative Study of Select Atomic Bomb Poetry and Fiction

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Abstract: In atomic bomb literature, landscape plays a crucial role in depicting the environmental impact and reflecting the resulting psychological trauma. Although landscapes may seem like passive backdrops, they are nonetheless integral to portraying both human and geographical dimensions of trauma in these works. They evoke desolation, grief, alienation, horror, the uncanny, and existential dread, among many others. They portray the macabre through the depiction of corpses and human remains integrated into the setting, while horrified awe is inspired by the representation of the extensive physical destruction that instantly reshaped the entire cityscape. These terrains invert the giving, nurturing nature of land and water which are contaminated with radiation, the presence of broken objects, or dead bodies. Moreover, landscapes represent a loss in the aftermath of the atomic bombing in multiple ways—of precious objects, neighbourhoods, homes, nature, familiar sights, places associated with good memories, etc.

Hence, landscape representation has a multifaceted role in atomic bomb literature, giving glimpses into the dystopian vision of the atomic bomb's aftermath. The significance is clear in how they are used for both literal and metaphorical purposes in atomic bomb fiction, with terms like ‘cremation ground’, ‘atomic wasteland’, etc., conveying the severity of the destruction. The paper seeks to study the role of landscape in depicting environmental impact and related trauma in select poems of Yamaguchi Tsutomu and Tōge Sankichi; a short story “The Rite" by Hiroko Takenishi, and the novel *City of Corpses*by Yōko Ōta. Furthermore, the study explores how different genres utilize landscapes to convey the magnitude of atomic devastation.

Keywords: Atomic Bomb Literature, Hibakusha Testimonies, Landscape Representation, Human and Environmental Impact of Atomic Bombings

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked a turning point that plunged the world into a state of precariousness, inspiring a body of literature that documents both the environmental devastation and human trauma caused by the use of nuclear weapons. This sense of fragility, both physical and psychological, was laid bare by the nuclear devastation and is vividly depicted in the landscapes of atomic bomb literature. For the hibakusha (the atomic bomb survivors), this literature serves as a powerful testimonial to the specific destruction they witnessed, making it one of the earliest genres to directly address the impact of nuclear weapons. The genres of poetry, short stories, and novels attempt to express the different dimensions of unimaginable suffering they experienced.

In these works, landscapes hold both literal and symbolic significance, connecting different temporal dimensions. They evoke the world before the bombings—though that world may exist only in memories—while also representing the immediate aftermath and the future. For example, landscapes evoke the possibility of recurring devastation or, conversely, the potential for the land's revival after destruction.

In testimonial works, the landscape also represents two vital aspects of Japanese culture: nature and community. On both personal and collective levels, landscape representations are embedded with the survivor's psychic, spiritual, and physical trauma, serving as a visual testament to the extreme, apocalyptic destruction wrought by the bomb. As Richard Minear states in his introduction to Hiroshima: Three Witnesses, "Together, riverbeds and river-banks became the setting where the drama of life and, more often, death played itself out... Atomic holocaust may render all geography ultimately irrelevant; but it was Hiroshima the bomb obliterated on August 6, not a nameless, featureless spot on the map" (9). In contrast, the revival of places in the survivor’s memory, or the regrowth of nature on the devastated land, offers a brief glimpse of hope, reconnecting survivors briefly to life and their collective place within society.

It is undeniable that landscape has a key role to play in the atomic bomb literature, but this role is shaped by expectations and constraints of different genres—poetry, short stories, or novels. Each form engages with environmental destruction and individual trauma in distinct ways, eliciting

different subjective responses. By comparing how each genre portrays the trauma, the role of literary forms in framing the experience and shaping the reader's understanding of the nuclear catastrophe becomes clear. The following analysis examines a few poetic works by Tōge Sankichi and Yamaguchi Tsutomu, followed by the short story "The Rite" and concludes with the novel City of Corpses.

In Tōge Sankichi's poem "Landscape with River," the landscape is marked by the arrival of winter marks the landscape. The poem initially describes a beautiful landscape with a timeless river, snow-clad mountains, and a city scene with its bridges and houses. Then, the narrator and his wife begin a conversation with the query, "Tonight...what will we wear to keep warm?" (343).

The hibakusha, having lost their homes and material wealth/ possessions, have been made vulnerable to the elements in addition to the radiation, which threatened their survival after the bombing. Thus, the beauty of the remaining landscape—untouched by the bomb—has become dangerous rather than comforting.

On this river bank, the narrator remarks to his wife, "we too/ are living grave markers," meaning that the survivors have become their own graves, like living monuments or markers that, with their existence, commemorate their own eventual deaths. The use of 'we' indicates that they share this fate with others as well. This observation by the narrator about their fate is grounded in the altered setting of the riverbank above the leveled city of "bleached bones", where flames rise on the surface of the waves.

In another poem called "Landscape," Tōge remarks how the landscape itself has become the permanent symbol of trauma that the victims carry everywhere with them. He says, "You and I carry with us a landscape always in flames" (355). This line is repeated in the poem with a slight change, shifting from the words "carry with us" to "live in a." This repetition emphasizes how the landscape in flames has become a new normal for the survivors. The flames here refer to the fires that continued to burn the city after the initial destruction brought about by the atomic bomb. The lines also indicate

a memory of the city landscape overwritten in the aftermath, where the past beauty and connection to the landscape are obliterated (for the hibakusha), leaving only the imprint of destruction.

The destroyed land also includes nature, whose portrayal in the atomic bomb literary works is inverted: instead of nature evoking beauty or peace, riverbanks and tree shades become disturbing. The water and land, once representing life, are now overwhelmed by death and macabre imagery.

In atomic bomb literature, the landscape is saturated with death and devastation, with rubble from fallen buildings, riverbanks, and other locations becoming places where people die en masse. These landscapes foreground the tragedy of the atomic bomb victims' deaths. In poetry, the landscape is often narrowed down to the specific places where the people die, highlighting the injustice of their death. For example, in Tōge Sankichi's poem "The Smile," the death scene is set in the stench of pus: "In the choking stench of pus, / stripped even of the capacity for hatred, for anger, / you sent the world of the living that last smile" (346). Here, the visceral decay of the body pervades the setting, emphasising the inescapable reality of suffering and powerlessness. Similarly, in "Dying" by Tōge, the setting of a roadside death emphasises the inhumanity of the death: "Why? / Why here/ by the side of the road/ cut off, dear, from you/ why/ must/I /die/ ?" (310). In these examples, the settings are sites of death, which reinforce the horror of the suffering. The disruption of familiar settings—whether through the presence of a human in pus (an element previously absent) or a roadside (ordinarily associated with life and movement)— brings discomfort to the reader and confronts the humanity in them.

The poetic form allows for the expression of the horrific landscape post-bombing more symbolically and artistically, often evoking a stronger emotional response through vivid imagery. For example, Yamaguchi Tsutomu refers to the landscape as an "atomic wasteland" in one tanka in his work *And the River Flowed as a Raft of Corpse*. The term wasteland carries a profound sense of loss and desolation from the survivors' perspective while also symbolizing the devastating impacts of nuclear weapons, obliteration of natural life, and environmental degradation. Yamaguchi's atomic wasteland differs starkly from T.S. Eliot's wasteland in his iconic poem The Waste Land. While

Eliot's wasteland is symbolic of spiritual decay and cultural fragmentation following World War I, Yamaguchi's is not merely symbolic but rooted in a physical, lived trauma, reflecting the tangible environmental and human impacts of nuclear devastation.

In another poem, the poet calls the land a "cremation ground," capturing how the entire city was turned into a graveyard where all living beings were indiscriminately killed. In yet another poem, Yamaguchi evokes the trauma of the explosion's heat and the subsequent fires which consumed the people and the land. He proclaims, "The ground will never dry / it is soaked with the fat of all the people/ who burned and died" (35). Metaphorically, the lines suggest that the trauma and suffering of the victims have seeped into the very land. They also imply that the transformation of the land is irreversible and that the agony of the dead can never be erased from the land in which they died. In these lines, the image of the ground, saturated with the remains of those who perished, challenges the idea that human memory fades over time, instead suggesting that the land itself silently bears witness to trauma and continues to hold traces of what has occurred on it.

In the short story "The Rite," landscape plays a more technically complex role in portraying the trauma and healing that emerges from the atomic bomb experience: supporting the narrative structure, reflecting character development (or the mental state of the protagonist Aki), and imbibing a philosophy of life in the aftermath through the depiction of nature.

After the bombing, Aki becomes obsessed with rites. The story begins with a description of the landscape outside her window, where she sees a dying man as his family brings him inside their riverside home with a tin roof on which several red peppers have been set out to dry. His family surround him, wailing and mourning as they attempt to save him. His death, witnessed in his house on a hill, contrasts sharply with the atomic bomb deaths Aki reflects on later in the story.

Her friends, whose lives and deaths remain unconfirmed even years later, had no graves or rites and, in a sense, no homes where they could safely pass on. For Aki, their memories are tied to the places she met them when she once met them—a pile of hay in a big tilled field where she used to lie with a friend, or the scenery from the night before the bombing when a friend visited: the croaking of frogs

near her home, and the veranda where they took turns rushing out every time, they heard a splash in the garden pond. Through similar landscapes in her present—like when she looks out of her rented room window into the river beach beyond the garden—she revives traces of those past moments, once free of death and trauma.

Nature, for one, reflects her and other survivors' struggle to live despite the odds. The protagonist, Aki describes how, in the shade of things, "little sprouting lives" make a secret gamble. She further narrates, "however secret the bet, however poor the chance, the thing that once begins to breathe alive will go on living in the dark of the night" (178). The phrase "dark of the night" mirrors her traumatic state, and through the description of nature, she ultimately explores her own and other hibakusha's struggles to survive and carry on despite the lasting physical and mental impacts.

The story's conclusion is crucial to its narrative structure and Aki's inner state. Her abandoned and hauntingly silent surroundings are again converted to a thriving one, indicating a step towards healing. However, the transition between both landscapes remains ambiguous—whether the silence is real or a product of her imagination is unclear. Later, she admits to fears of the tragedy repeating: "But there are times, nevertheless, when I am struck with the dread premonition that suddenly one day all those tall buildings will come tumbling down...All these familiar things about me every day...It seems to me I hear the sound of all these things crumbling down" (193-4). This lingering fear reveals her trauma, her inability to fully reconnect with life around her, and her continued entrapment in a world of death.

Aki's fear of the world crumbling once again reflects a projection of the past into the future, reinforcing the persistence of trauma in atomic bomb literature. This temporal collapse can be understood in two significant ways: as repetition compulsion, a symptom of trauma embedded in the narrative, and as a rhetorical strategy, subtly warning of a possible future destruction akin to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As Pramod Nayar notes in Nuclear Cultures, when nuclear fictions imagine the destruction of the world, it is "a political choice as an aesthetic because it rejects the necessity of

local realities—the specifics of cities, people, etc.—in favour of a figure of the human form or cities that could be destroyed" (150).

In Aki's case, however, the setting does not erase specificity; instead, it is precisely through the landscapes she inhabits—both real and remembered—that her trauma manifests. Her surroundings reinforce her alienation, as she remains disconnected from the present, caught between a lost past and an uncertain future. The story's shifting landscapes mirror her lingering despair and emotional detachment, revealing how trauma disrupts time, memory, and perception of the world itself.

The role of landscape in portraying these atrocities shifts with different genres. As demonstrated in the analysis above, the landscape description in the atomic bomb poetry is often fragmented, focusing on a particular disturbing visual—such as in Yamaguchi's line, "the river flowed as a raft of corpses," which serves as the title of his poetry collection. On the other hand, in the short story, the landscape (symbolically and thematically) weaves in the personal narrative arc of the journey of the character Aki.

In Yōko Ōta's work, the landscape is represented through the cityscape, which she portrays holistically, narrating the condition of different parts of the city and detailing the destruction of various localities, bridges, and cultural landmarks. In the novel/ testimonial work City of Corpses, the chapter "Hiroshima, City of Doom" exemplifies this approach. Here, Ōta recalls the beauty of Hiroshima's cityscape—its topography, rivers, bridges, nature, houses, and buildings—associating them with pride and fond memories before the bombing.

After describing what the city once was, she concludes the first part of the chapter with: "This was the city which, one morning at the height of summer, suddenly and without warning, there flashed an eerie blue flash" (180). However, the bombing's devastation brings an overwhelming sense of grief as the narrator witnesses the destruction of the cityscape. At one point, she mentions how she eventually grows accustomed to the dead bodies but finds herself filled with grief and heartache upon

seeing Hiroshima Castle—once a key landmark —now "toppled to the earth and absolutely flattened" (226).

For Ōta, the castle was a crucial part of the cityscape, one that brought the city "flavour of the past" (226). Its destruction represents an immense loss of Hiroshima's tradition and history. She also describes hundreds of temples, once a "grand sight," like the "ancient buildings of the Hongan Temple" as "completely flattened" (227) without even the pieces of the roof visible.

The description of Hiroshima city, with its cultural, historical, social, and political dimensions, plays the role of highlighting its uniqueness and value in contrast to the dehumanization of the city's land and people through the impact of the bombing. Ōta's grief over the lost landmarks like the Hiroshima castle and the temples is not just about the physical obliteration of these buildings but about the severed connection they provided to the rest of the city. The landscape depictions offer a glimpse into her profound sense of loss and trauma over the erasure of personal and collective memory, identity, and cultural heritage tied to Hiroshima pre-bombing.

As the narrative reveals, the transformed landscape—filled with fires and burning, dying people, and numerous corpses—creates a geographical trauma for Ōta, which becomes an integral part of the atomic bomb trauma that haunts her. This stark transformation is reinforced throughout the work. For instance, a young woman describes seeing the moment of destruction from afar when "an indescribably strange smoke was billowing and then it got pitch dark" (222). Later, on a train journey to a safer place after the bombing, Ōta recounts the changed geography: "desolate fields where every last house had burned" (229) and "rows of collapsed houses" as far as the eye could see, creating a 'nightmarish' picture.

The narrative contrasts the transformation of the city with its past, when it was "pure and clean" in Ōta's words, only to be reduced to a place reeking of "rotting human flesh," rendered uninhabitable. This overwhelming transformation weighs heavily on her so that upon reaching a town untouched by the bomb, she feels on the verge of fainting at the sight of cherry trees—once a familiar presence in her hometown.

Ōta, to convey the scale of the destruction, also references parts of the city she didn't witness, such as reports of fire burning even on the surface of rivers and the severe destruction in the western areas, which suffered the greatest damage. In the novel *City of Corpses*, the landscape descriptions are more comprehensive and ted compared to the other two genres. Yōko Ōta's work takes on an almost documentary approach, providing specific examples of destroyed landscapes to highlight the intensity of the bomb's impact. For example, the town of Yokogawa, with its small factory belt with many lumber mills, is depicted as having “scars to show that were ghastlier yet than the ashes of residential areas” (227). She describes flames that "belched and swirled in astonishing shapes" (227) from windows of the 'concrete' warehouses and factory buildings there. These vivid depictions give a sense of the vast scale and intensity of the destruction.

John Treat, in his work *Writing Ground Zero,* complicates how Ōta attempts to convey the scale of the atrocity (which influences the reader), he says Ōta mediates the scale, "through herself and in a sense to herself; the point of view which Ōta selected in *City of Corpses* insured that the map of Hiroshima she was to draw would be precisely the frantic route she took out of the city" (211). He argues that “burnt buildings, burnt people—an unrelieved range of inert carnage” (212) have only one “center of consciousness”—that of Ōta herself. This restricts the reader, limiting access to only what Ōta experienced, knew, and was able to convey. Moreover, the documentary manner in which she conveys the whole narrative, in John Treat's words, “renders us [the readers]... redundant and surplus” (212).

Nevertheless, the landscape foregrounds the extreme trauma and unimaginable suffering of the victims, shaping the representation of the helpless conditions in which the survivors found themselves. For example, Ōta describes a shrine where her sister lived, reduced to ruins with only a scorched giant tree remaining, the ongoing fire preventing her family from reaching her sister's place. In another incident, she describes a road that is blocked with “dead bodies,” or collapsed buildings, interwoven with the dead, creating a haunting scene of destruction.

But upon seeing the destroyed buildings and the dead in the surroundings near her home, but noticing pots and kettles and other non-living things intact, she feels "as [she] would feel on seeing, safe and sound, people [she] thought had died: how wonderful to clasp their hands in [hers]!" (220). This juxtaposition highlights the surreal nature of her experience; the survival of mundane objects amidst widespread human loss evokes in her a fleeting moment of hope and connection.

Additionally, nature, an integral part of the landscape, plays multiple roles in the novel—contrasting the horrific scene, offering moments of respite, or appearing in unnatural forms due to the atomic bombing. In one scene, Ōta describes a collapsed temple that pinned people under and killed three people from a family. As she and her family turn away, they walk towards the "strong rays of the afternoon sun" (224). Nature also provides brief relief; when Ōta and her family reach a more level area, they cook food from their remaining rations, and for the first time, she feels relief at her survival, sitting in the "hot sun and eating hot stew."

However, nature also appears grotesquely altered. She describes, "tall trees ... now only the thick trunks remained. The branches and leaves were all dry as a bone, curled up tongue-like. The large ginkgo tree there ...was torn in two, in three; one part hung down toward the cemetery, one part hung down limply to the side, and the bark smouldered like charcoal that hasn't been fired long enough" (220). Even the temperature is described as "breathlessly hot," reflecting unnatural climate conditions created by the bombing.

In conclusion, while the portrayal of landscape differs across various genres, these differences are artistic rather than fundamental. Since artistic quality cannot be the basis of criteria for judgment for testimonial literature like atomic bomb literature, the function of the representation takes precedence. The landscape representation plays its role in bringing fore reality from multiple angles, making what would otherwise be inaccessible and unimaginable more tangible.

Poetry, with its capacity for evoking multiple meanings, subtext, intense imagery, and symbolism, makes the role of landscape emotionally charged, often using it to convey the horrors of

nuclear warfare directly and provocatively. Its concise form also allows it to raise political questions about the morality of nuclear weapons in an unflinching, confrontational way, as seen in Tōge's work.

On the other hand, in the short story, the landscape reinforces the story's themes, offering a glimpse into the inner lives of the protagonist and allowing the reader to understand more deeply the personal story of Aki's survival. The novel, with its broader scope, can offer a more comprehensive exploration of the environmental impacts and human trauma caused by the atomic bombings. However, in the documentary nature of the work under consideration here, landscape descriptions function as factual records as well, which are interwoven with the subjective experiences of the author. Each genre, therefore, plays a crucial role in framing the nuclear catastrophe, using landscape not just as a backdrop but as an active force that reflects both individual and collective suffering, testifies to the scale of the devastation, and reveals the inescapable entanglement of human and environmental loss.

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