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Negotiating Motherhood and the Self: Issues of Temporality and Physicality in Kimiko Hahn's *The Narrow Road to the Interior*

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PHYSICALITY IN KIMIKO HAHN'S *THE NARROW ROAD TO THE INTERIOR*

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Edward Brunner

Motherhood, as a physical, social, and personal construct, is entwined in issues of the body and the self. Kimiko Hahn's *The Narrow Road to the Interior* attempts to work through her understanding of her own identity as a mother, a daughter and a woman by exploring the ways with which these identities are created, developed, and sometimes destroyed. Struggling to create a sense of priority without sacrificing something, Hahn often attempts to find a way to separate these identities that can often not exist without each other by exploring the form of the personal memory and the unfolding story. The Japanese poetic form of the *zuihitsu*—a poetic form that connects various fragmented ideas of the author -- is particularly useful for this exploration with its prose component and its refusal to be confined to numbers of lines or the patterns of syllables and phonemes like the identities that Hahn is negotiating. Because Hahn's struggle is partly a way to overcome guilt for desiring a self-identity, she illuminates the ways in which female identities are constructed in terms of their temporal and physical relations.

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Motherhood, as a physical, social, and personal construct, is entwined in issues of the body and the self. Kimiko Hahn's *The Narrow Road to the Interior* attempts to work through her understanding of her own identity as a mother, a daughter and a woman by exploring the ways with which these identities are created, developed, and sometimes destroyed. Struggling to create a sense of priority without sacrificing something, Hahn often attempts to find a way to separate these identities that can often not exist without each other by exploring the form of the personal memory and the unfolding story. The Japanese poetic form of the *zuihitsu*—a poetic form that connects various fragmented ideas of the author -- is particularly useful for this exploration with its prose component and its refusal to be confined to numbers of lines or the patterns of syllables and phonemes like the identities that Hahn is negotiating. Because Hahn's struggle is partly a way to overcome guilt for desiring a self-identity, she illuminates the ways in which female identities are constructed in terms of their temporal and physical relations.

As an American author and the daughter of a Japanese mother and German father, Kimiko Hahn's identities are entwined with numerous cultural expectations. Japanese in origin, the *zuihitsu* form provides an ideal structure for Hahn's poetry. Reflective of both ancient tradition and the modern, the loosely structured style provides a disjointed, yet fluid, development of language that reflects the parts of the identities Hahn is working with. This negotiation is important in two of Hahn's poems in the collection: "Utica Station" and "Opening Her Text." By negotiating through poetry, Hahn is also showing how narrative helps to construct identity. Throughout the collection, but particularly in these two pieces, Hahn draws on narrative

techniques that mix prose and poetry-- like the *zuihitsu*—exemplify the struggles and negotiations present throughout the work.

Hahn describes the form of the *zuihitsu* in the first poem of *The Narrow Road to the Interior*. She says of other forms “none offered the sense of disorder that feels so integral....none offers that a sense of disorder might be artfully ordered by fragmenting, juxtaposing, contradicting, varying length or—even within a piece—topic,” (3). The poem, entitled “Compass” reads like a letters, beginning with “Dear L,” (3) and ending with “Yours, K,” (4). The epistolary format sets the poetry off with a personal connection that is present throughout the rest of her work. Because of the intimacy ascribed by the author through these forms, I will treat the narrator of the poems as Hahn.

This positioning of the author as narrator allows for an understanding of the specific identities being negotiated in relation to their perceptions by both Hahn and others. This positioning is also important because, according to Priya Lalvani “the ‘story of mothering’ is a culture product that is often inconsistent with live experiences” (276). Throughout her poetry, Hahn is attempting to develop her narrative voice in a way that is separate from her voice as a mother, but just as she is unable to split these identities, she is unable to split these voices. Ultimately, Hahn as narrator allows for the reader to recognize the specific “story of mothering” that she is constructing and associating with and without this duality her voice would not be as strong. This story is an important factor in the construction of an identity that is highly influenced by culture. Researchers Jennifer Heisler and Jennifer Butler Ellis focus their research on the way in which motherhood identities become public constructions that women expect to be measured and evaluated. A common fear of mothers is that they will be judged for not being a proper parent by peers or bystanders and therefore they are often conscious of the ways their

parenting is portrayed in public. Hahn's own guilt is associated with such manifestations of fears; her attempts to separate her narrative voice from her mothering self produces a fear of inadequacy in either role. A constant desire to be a "perfect" parent can lead to moments of anxiety and distress during a child's public misbehavior. This awareness can be seen in Hahn's poem "Utica Station," when Hahn remembers her reaction to a stranger saying "*you're a good mother*" (8). She "nearly wept" (8) in response to this recognition of her parenting and her child weeps.

Although not explicitly stated, the collection's involvement with an understanding of motherhood is also relative to the death of Hahn's own mother. In "Pulse and Impulse," Hahn uses a diary/journal type format for the poem in which she discusses her mother's death seven years earlier (47). This sudden loss, now situated as a long past memory, provides a base from which to examine the poetic development of "Utica Station" and "Opening Her Text." Hahn recalls her mother's accident, situating it around how old she and her daughters were at the time. This need to provide a temporal location for this important event shows the way in which Hahn's mind operates: on a timeline or within a story. Hahn's lines juxtapose her own memory with her understanding.

I realize now that when Mother died in a car accident seven years ago—the girls were four and six, I was thirty-eight—that I had never felt as deeply as when I felt that loss. As though I'd never felt love or loss. And I began to understand something I had always missed. Something my mother couldn't give me because no mother can give a child what the mother gives in fairy tales. Which is one thing she did give me—fairy tales. (Perhaps that is where girls learn about the body: Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel,--) Little did I know that my mother was both the mother and stepmother in "Hansel and Gretel."

These lines are indicative of the ways in which Hahn's language works throughout the collection. Here Hahn is also attempting to negotiate the way in which she will emulate her mother's behavior. According to Alice Adams, literature on mothering often describes the desire to either reject or replicate as an important part developing identities (414). Perhaps surprisingly, this poem is not situated at the beginning or end of the collection, but almost in the middle, an examination midway of the issues she is dealing with. It's positioning also shows that she is not yet able, or is unable to reject or replicate her mother's parenting in her own life.

The main reason to consider the overall placement of these poems is the ways with which they internally negotiate the idea of time. The two poems I am examining are placed at the beginning of *The Narrow Road to the Interior*. This placement is helpful in examining the poems along a developing timeline and looking at the poems as part of the *Narrow Road's* timeline is important for several reasons. Each operates on its own fixed timeline, either patterned on a story or a trip as a way of developing a fixed space for negotiation. The positioning of the stories is also important when looking for a development of understanding in the narrator. The recurring discussions of motherhood in the two different poems suggest the complicated, ever-changing understanding of what Hahn understands a mother to be. Examining elements of these poems in conjunction with one another also helps create a more solid central identity of the narrator.

Hahn shows that the most basic identity, the self, is fully of multiplicity. In these two pieces, she focuses on the self as an artist and as a scholar, always in conflict with the mother identity. Hahn's poetry shows that the self is the main oppositional identity to which her others are compared and formed in connection to time and touch. Through her construction of her own personal narratives, she is attempting to overcome feelings of helplessness in her situation. This attempt at overcoming helplessness in the formation of her identities is not unlike the physical

experience of motherhood itself, further complicating her efforts. Physically, the role of a mother is central to the child's survival in utero and during the first months of life and in "Maternal Thinking," Sara Ruddick argues that the constant struggle between power and powerlessness is both a historical and cultural issue common in most societies (343). During gestation, the mother's body surrenders nutrients and energy to the fetus in order for it to survive while still maintaining her own body. After birth, children are reliant upon the parent for all its basic needs. The woman's powerlessness comes from the biological surrender pregnancy forces the body into and after birth when the child is physically separate but entirely dependent. While the joys of motherhood are felt, Hahn's sense of guilt is common of many mothers that are forced to reconcile the feeling of being simultaneously powerful and powerless. This struggle is present in the shift between the self and the mothering identity within the poems as Hahn attempts to hold a dominant identity that has a sense of stability while not neglecting her children.

Hahn struggles throughout with guilt of her own mothering abilities as well as guilt stemming from her own experiences as a daughter. Together, these issues make up the central struggle of much of the work, always struggling with identities in terms of the mothering self. The conflict of identities has been studied by many psychologists who, looking at the effects of pregnancy and child raising, have attempted to understand when the motherhood identity becomes constructed within a woman. According to Heisler and Ellis, the complicated development of a motherhood identity cannot not be contributed solely to the act of pregnancy, but rather it is developed gradually throughout the child bearing (447). Ruddick argues that the maternal body is key in the struggle between the relationships of power and powerlessness (346). Hahn's desire to remove her mothering identity expresses her frustrations with this imbalance as she seeks to be rid of the physical feelings of powerlessness. However she does not desire a

removal of her children and the complications of these emotions are what manifest in her poetry, particularly during her use of self-referential terms as a way of identifying her individual needs.

The use of a self-referential term is important in the development of “Utica Station.” “I have,” “I think,” “I would,” even “my,” (5) create an idea of possession to which Hahn is laying claim. The use of the “I” is an attempt to provide a distinction of her thoughts that are for herself from those that are related to her children. The confusion this type of role creates is echoed when she says “Always, *Mommy needs to—I need to--*,” (7). Her instinct to refer to herself as “Mommy” shows that the self is being overrun with this other identity. This confusion is recognized by Hahn in the poem as she describes her struggle to separate herself from her mothering duties. Despite her efforts though, Hahn is unable to exclusively think only of herself in the poem, often using “I” and “we” together, showing her connection to the external elements that she is interacting with.

Physical sensations are an important aspect of the narrator’s disruption and are often expressed in terms of their proximity to the narrator. Hahn’s physical sensations in “Utica Station” are also translated through the description of her heart swollen “large as a newborn,” (5) “as if a gland, not a muscle,” (6) and “as it—a hot water bottle” (7). She concludes the image of heart with “that’s what the heart was, swollen—like a mother weeping for something” (8). This swollen heart acts as a physical expression of her emotional state; swollen with memory and feeling as she thinks about herself and her relation to her children. “Opening Her Text” expresses the physical in similar ways; “nestling” with her daughters as she reads to them, bodies “swelling” with confusion.

The physical and the swelling of bodies transcends into the issue of womanhood for Hahn as she describes her fears of what she has taught her daughters about being a woman. “If I can at

least take care of a part of her perhaps she will learn to see her self as more than a point of departure. Perhaps she will see that a woman loves her, so she can *become a woman*" (12). With these lines, Hahn is connecting the ideas of the self and the ideas of the mother in a specific way. The ways in which Hahn construct the sentence with "perhaps she will learn to see her self," implies that Hahn may not have been able to see her self as something other than a point of departure. Because her self is two words, not one, Hahn is specifically talking about the self identity, not necessarily the self as a whole person.

In "Utica Station," Hahn relies on the temporality of the train ride in order to emphasize her own passing recall of memories. The poem focuses on the ways in which memories form and negotiate Hahn's identity as a mother. Sparked by the sight of the mother and child, Hahn attempts to use her memories as a way of rethinking the success of her mothering self. Hahn's initial description of the woman and child focuses on their physical colors "light dark skin and light, maybe green, eyes. Her baby is lighter" and she describes the man "who picked up the ticket and kissed them, very black" (5). This detail to color situates the figures in relation to one another as a way of understanding where the child is situated to the maternal body: The makeup of the child's skin, part its mother's, part its father's, and yet all its own and in this case, lighter than the mother. By focusing on the darker color of the male, the child is more closely situated both visually and physically to the mother and therefore more connected to Hahn's thoughts.

While the examination of the skin is the only physical description of the mother and child, later in the poem Hahn engages in further spatial relations when she sees "the mother and infant sleep now, the boy like a cat on her chest" (7). She recalls "that lovely pressure" of her own children. The physicality of such memories is part of Hahn's technique throughout the poem. Memories are translated into physical feelings in terms like "weighted" and "swollen." By

translating the images before her into physical sensations of memories, the narrator is transported through her own thoughts like the train that she rides. Her lament at the speed of the train shown in a phrase like “the sudden brick landscape” (7) associates the speed of the trip with the speed at which these memories have moved into the past, no longer part of the tangible present.

Hahn’s retrospection on motherhood in “Opening Her Text” operates within associations drawn from “The Tale of Genji.” She moves between characters and aspects of the tale that have her associations in life. “His search for the mother is a karmic draw,” (10) she says of Genji’s move between mother and nurse and father. She then asks “What of the moments that pull the mother away from the infant to the man,” (10). This question is representative of Hahn’s discomfort and guilt over the conflict between her mothering and sexual self. She associates the jealousy of the Genji story with both that of the lover and the child. Fearing that her daughter may not learn from her choices (10) or that jealousy is a way of life (11), Hahn’s motherly fears are overrun with her own jealousy over the possession of self her children have had on her. In turn, she is jealous of her children, wishing to keep them close and even to trade places. This desire to be not mother but daughter is shown the phrases “At this moment I want to be her, so someone can mother *me*” (10). Her lament for this type of comfort is a representation of her mourning for the loss of her mother and for her need to bear the identity as a daughter. Although she is still a daughter, the physical existence of her mother is no longer there to validate this identity.

Throughout the poem, Hahn is using the form of the *zuihitsu* to move between her identities with relative ease. This positioning occurs in the temporal space, moving between her past and present fears and emotions. She struggles with her identity as a sexual woman because her relationships with men have been altered by her physical and mental maternal state. This

alteration is expressed as confusing and sometimes upsetting. In “Utica Station” she writes “this is the difference. I don’t find myself trailing a man around a room, screening gesture and tone. This is the difference: I thought I was missing. Missing something” (8). The displacement of her sexual and romantic self with the maternal self creates a gap in her self-perceptions. She recalls a longing for the intimacy of her marriage over her duties of motherhood and she says she would have rather been “waiting at home for their father, not swinging them in the park” (5). The language of missing and waiting conjures images of the holes and gaps, and combined with the swelling of her heart in other lines of the poem, creates a tension between her selves struggling to coexist. Although the heart is swollen, it does not replace the “missing” of the romantic and sexual self, but rather masks its “missing” in a different way.

Hahn’s sexual self also questions her experiences and feelings about men, asking “Do I fall for men not this girl’s father—as fuel? As a tonic for waiting? As a way to ruin? As a way to subvert some painful remnant?” (11). The act of questioning in “Opening Her Text” is part of the narrator’s own storyline as she reflects on “The Tale of Genji.” These questions equate her own feelings with some sort of motivation outside of desire, misplacing her own wants with specific reasons. This association is easy to make as it allows for a takeover of the sexual self. Hahn presents this issue when she says “it is so easy to abandon the self—as the lover becomes a constant daydream which life interrupts,” (11). The lover, the self, the mother; all act as forces of interruption and disturbance in these two poems. The only clear way that Hahn is able to move between them is in the form of story and memory; and they are disruptions in themselves.

Hahn’s entire collection in *The Narrow Road to the Interior* is about the complicated negotiations of memory and story, narrative fictions and memorial truths. Many of the poems enact a non-linear structure that allows the physical and temporal to collide. Hahn’s attempts to

negotiate and define her own identities are important examples of the ways in which women struggle to balance identities in the presence of cultural expectations. By looking at these types of negotiations in works of women like Kimiko Hahn, we may begin to further develop an understanding of the ways in which bodies and identities are so intertwined and yet separate within an individual and the ways with which our cultural expectations so closely dictate such negotiations.

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