



Textualizing Mud: Disaster Narrative in Ishii Yūka's *Hundred Years Mud*

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Abstract

Hundred Years Mud (2018) by Ishii Yūka engages with Chennai floods of 2015. Declared as 'Disaster Zone', heavy rains and the ensuing floods caused large scale destruction and disrupted everyday life, bringing the city to halt. The narrator, a Japanese language instructor in an IT company in Chennai, witnessed the calamity. However, it was the mud on the bridge of Adyar river which caught her attention. She imagines locating items from her past inside the mud, evoking nostalgia and inciting memories. Hence, the present paper explores *Hundred Years Mud* drawing from the analysis of Disaster Narrative. It further delves into exploring the symbolization of 'mud' as a literary device, and examines its role as a crucial narrative tool defining human emotions.

Keywords: Disaster Narrative, Chennai Floods, Textualizing, Mud, Memories.

Introduction:

India has fascinated generations of Japanese travellers, scholars and writers. Intrigued by its cultural heritage and philosophical traditions, along with its landscapes, people and their lifestyle, the country has sparked a special interest among prominent Japanese writers. It has been the subject of well-known literary works and Japanese literature shares a rich and complex relationship with the country. However, seldom has the country's natural disaster been taken up as a primary theme. Disaster writing is not new to Japanese literature, encompassing works exploring disasters from earthquakes, tsunamis to volcanoes, fires etc. In recent times there is a clear surge in literary works based on the catastrophic Fukushima triple disaster of 2011. Commonly known as post-disaster literature (震災後文学, shinsaigo bungaku) in Japan, it not only documents the devastation brought by the disaster, but also offer insights into the trauma, vulnerabilities, and sufferings of the survivors as well as of the displaced.

*Hundred Years Mud*¹ (百年泥, Hyakunen Doro) by Ishii Yūka 石井遊佳 is based on the Chennai floods of 2015, with the focus on the arterial Adyar river which flows through the city. The southern city was inundated and the river was flooded due to the torrential rains. Many newspapers reported the rains as 'unprecedented', as it disrupted the everyday lives leaving residents with no access to basic necessities and essential supplies like milk, food and water. Large parts of the city were submerged in water, with power cuts and no internet connectivity for days. Inundated roads, airport shutting its operations, delayed train services brought city life to a halt. Chennai was declared a 'disaster zone' by the government (Bremner, 2020). While rescue workers worked relentlessly for days helping stranded people evacuate to safe places, support poured in

¹ The title in English is from the cover page of the 2018 Japanese edition.

from other states. Reported as ‘worst floods in over a hundred years’², the devastation caused by the catastrophic floods was enormous, claiming hundreds of lives, displacing millions of people and causing a huge economic impact to the state. Though immediate large- scale rescue and relief work were carried out by the concerned authorities, however, studies show that ‘one of the major challenges was the clearance of the garbage from the city that got accumulated during the floods’ (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021, p.43) on the roads of the city. The primary reason for the heavy rainfall was attributed to El Nino conditions, however, research suggest that unchecked urbanization, along with unregulated development (Ramanathan, 2015; Vencatesan, 2016; Bremmer, 2020) and filling up of lakes and water bodies (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021, p.48) triggered the inundated streets and residential areas. The ecological concerns with regards to environmental degradation, exploitation of natural resources have been highlighted by several studies, even calling floods a ‘man- made disaster’ (Ramanathan, 2015; Gaitonde & Gopichandran, 2016).

Adyar, particularly the overthrown mud left on the bridge of the overflowing river, constitutes the backdrop of *Hundred Years Mud*. Williams and Teramoto (2023) while comparing the depiction of river Ganga in Endo Shusaku’s *Deep River* and Adyar river in *Hundred Years Mud* note in their seminal essay that ‘Ishii shows the chaos and confusion which arises with the flooding of Adyar’ (52). It is going to be almost a decade since the disaster; however, the images of trauma and tragedy are still vivid in people’s memories. It would be intriguing to explore how the calamity is reflected in a foreigners’ eyes and her response to it. Hence, the present paper attempts to analyse the imagery of mud in *Hundred Years Mud* and the narrator’s response to it drawing from the viewpoint of Disaster Narrative. The paper, while investigating ‘mud’ as a literary device, delves into exploring its role as a crucial narrative tool defining human emotions.

The Author and the Work: Ishii Yūka was born in Osaka in 1963. She graduated from Waseda University, School of law in 1988³. After graduating, she moved back to Osaka, engaging herself in various part time jobs while concentrating on her writing. An avid reader, aspiring to be a writer since her high school days (Ishii, 2021, p. 67), Ishii proclaims writing to be her ‘karma’ (業, gō) ⁴. At the age of 36, she joined Tokyo University in the year 2000 to deepen her knowledge about Buddhism, where she met a Sanskrit scholar whom she married later. She studied Hindi too for some time (Ishii, 2021, p.71). Ishii stayed in Varanasi from 2006 to 2009 for three years accompanying her husband for his research work. After Varanasi they stayed in Kathmandu, Nepal for a brief period where Ishii worked as a Japanese language volunteer before moving to India in April 2015 to work as a Japanese language instructor in an IT company in Chennai.

Hundred Years Mud is based on her experience in Chennai city and is a fictionalised account of the disaster and this interweaving of reality with fiction can be felt throughout the work. There

² From *Chennai floods: Decoding the city’s worst rains in 100 years* by A. Pereira. 2015, The Indian Express (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/chennai-floods-rains-jayalalithaa-imd-reasons-rescue-news-updates/>).

From *Heaviest rainfall in 100 years drowns Chennai* by B. Walker. 2015, Dialogue Earth (<https://dialogue.earth/en/climate/heavy-rain-chennai/>).

³ From School of Law, Waseda University graduate wins Akutagawa literary prize. 2018 (<https://www.waseda.jp/folaw/law/news/2018/01/22/10188/>).

⁴ From Winner’s Interview, (2018, March). Ishii Yuka: After Studying Buddhism at University of Tokyo, I went to India with my Husband. *Bungeishunju*, 332- 337.



are many elements in the novel coinciding with the real life of the author. Ishii was staying in Chennai and acknowledges that there are similarities between the protagonist's description and her own experiences as language instructor as well as the location of the story (Ishii, 2024, p.254). Ishii was teaching Japanese in an IT company, and she stayed on the other side of the Adyar river. She was stranded at home for three days because of rains and would read and write while looking at the flooded streets (Ishii, 2021, p. 77) and crossed the river soon after the rains stopped, the experience on which the novel is based. Recounting her experience on the bridge about how she came up with the idea of writing about floods, Ishii notes,

if this flood has occurred after a hundred years, then it would consist of mud that has been lying at the bottom of the river for hundred years. If this mud is from the past hundred years, then its hundred years mud.

Isn't this hundred years mud packed with peoples' memories and thoughts of the hundred years. In other words, a hundred years' time is being thrown on the bridge I am standing on.

When I thought about it later, perhaps this was the moment when the idea of *Hundred Years Mud* was born. (Ishii, 2021, p.78) ⁵

Published in 2018, the winner of Shinchō Shinjin award 新潮新人賞 and the Akutagawa award 芥川賞, *Hundred Years Mud* garnered significant recognition in Japan. The narrator (私, watashi) is a divorced Japanese woman, who arrived in Chennai city a few months before the calamity. Her family name is Nogawa, and nickname Yocchan, which appears only once in the work. She belongs to the 'snow country' (雪国, yukiguni) (8), perhaps indicating Niigata prefecture and was living in Tokyo before arriving in India. She teaches Japanese at an IT company, however, she had to take up the job unwillingly, to repay the loan to her ex-husband. She is neither qualified for teaching nor does she have any prior experience, and seems to be having a difficult time in the classroom. The narrator lives on one side of the Adyar river and takes fifteen minutes to reach her office situated on the other side of the bridge. After three days of continuous rains, when eventually the rains subsided, the narrator comes down from her apartment. While crossing the bridge, she comes across a mud elevation and imagines some items related to her emerging from inside the mud. One of her students, Devraj, extricates these items from the mud. The story unfolds gradually as the narrator locates items, out of which two- a Suntory Yamazaki whiskey bottle (サントリー山崎 12 年, Santori Yamazaki 12 nen) and a glass mummy case (ガラスケース, garasu kēsu) are part of her past, while a memorial coin from Japan World Exposition 1970, Osaka (大阪万博の記念コイン, Ōsaka Banpaku Kinen Koin) is related to Devraj's past. Seeing these items, she is drawn into the memories of her ex-husband, mother and other acquaintances, and the narrative oscillates between past and present and the novel ends when she has crossed the bridge. Reminiscing about her past and reflecting on her life, she ponders pertinent questions about life and identity.

The work employs some magic realism elements in the plot, such as Indians flying with wings to commute to work with designated places allotted in the office parking area to keep the wings on landing. *Hundred Years Mud* is perhaps the only work in the large canon of contemporary Japanese literature, dealing with a natural disaster in India. Nevertheless, the commonplace themes like those of life and death at the ghats of Varanasi, Japanese travellers etc. form a significant part

⁵ All translations by the author.

of the intricate narrative. The narrative has spatial dimensions, as the plot moves between India and Japan. It is temporal too, as the story oscillates between present and past life of the narrator. The present-day sequences deal with her stay in India and experiences of teaching Japanese language to Indian students. The past sequences are related to her time in Japan, including her childhood, marriage, and divorce. The plot is written in a cyclical narrative, and does not progress in linear order, with no chapters or subchapters, sometimes making it a complex read.

Encountering Mud: Japanese people, in general, are well acquainted with long spells of rain, so in post-disaster scenario of *Hundred Years Mud*, it is the mud in particular, which catches the narrator's attention as she experiences floods for the first time (人生初の洪水, jinsei hatsu no kōzui) (9). Mud becomes the central trope around which the narrative progresses and presents multiple layers of meanings. Readers are constantly reminded of the fact that the flood and the ensuing mud is something which has happened once in hundred years, the reference however, gradually shifting from 'once in a century flood' (百年に一度の洪水, hyakunen ni ichido no kōzui) to 'hundred years mud' (百年泥) in the narrative. On the third day of the floods, on seeing some ground from her window, the narrator 'runs down the stairs in a rush' (いっさんに駆け下りる issan ni kakeoriru) to go to her office across the river⁶, as she wanted to 'step on the ground' (地面を踏みたかった, jimen o fumitakatta) (9). Interestingly, while the flood water running across the streets is described using colours; coffee coloured river (コーヒー色の川, kōhī iro no kawa), brown water (茶色の水, chairo no mizu), dark reddish brown (茶褐色, chakkashoku), ochre colour (黄土色 ōdo iro), the mud is characterised by its strong stench; smell beyond description (名状しがたい匂い meijōshigatai nioi), somewhat sweet soury smell, strong but without any characteristic (すっぱいような甘いような、くどいくせに目鼻立ちのはっきりしない匂い, suppai yōna, amai yōna, kudoiku kuse ni mehanadachi no hakkiri shinai nioi), sticky conspiring smell (ねっとりなれあった匂い), fierce rotten smell (強烈な腐敗臭, kyōretsuna fūhaishū). The narrator clearly seems to be struggling in defining the mud. A meter wide and fifty cm high mud elevation consists of discarded garbage of carpets, mattress, checked shirts, stuffed white polar bears, spider man figurine toys etc (9). Apart from the garbage, the narrator sees that some local people were able to locate the long lost acquaintances inside the mud.

The first item that the narrator imagines emerging from the mud is a Suntory Yamazaki whiskey bottle on which the narrator had written a haiku, along with her ex-husband's name in an inebriated state at a bar while she was with another man. She had just become aware of her husbands' infidelity and soon divorced him after the incident, and eventually left this man too (43-4). She later came to know that her husband thought of her as unfriendly (愛想はなし, aisō wa nashi) (45). The narrator recalls having trouble in comprehending when people sought a response from her, as she felt absolutely no necessity of giving one. As a result, she gained a reputation (定評, taiyō) of being 'unfriendly'. Readers come to know that the narrator is a woman of few words and is usually perceived as 'unfriendly' (愛想のない, aisōno nai) (45, 85) and quiet (79). The second item that Devraj extricates is the glass mummy case, which the narrator immediately recalls from a class excursion she took to a temple near the seashore. The temple priest showed the mermaid's mummy kept in the glass case to the students and rumours began making rounds among her classmates that there was a mermaid in each class. Now there is a common folklore story in

⁶ Ishii also apparently left her house on the third day. However, it was to check the office's condition. (Ishii 2021, 78)

Japan that upon coming to land, the mermaid lost her voice. The narrator believed that her mother was the mermaid (71). She reminisces about her childhood memories with her parents. She lost her father at the young age of five, soon after which her mother remarried, and she too died when the narrator was in middle school. The narrator describes her mother as beautiful and a skilful cook who would love knitting and sewing (74), but incommunicative (71) and expressionless (無表情, muhyōjō) (74). She would avoid talking to people. However, the non-communication behaviour never seems to have hindered narrators' relationship with her mother (74). The third item extricated from the mud is the Osaka Exposition Memorial coin which was related to the narrator's student Devraj's past. She imagines Devraj narrating his past when she locates the memorial coin in the mud. Devraj belonged to a poor family. His parents had eloped and got married. Though his mother never attended school, her memory was sharp and she worked at a local physician cum healer. She would always give medicine whenever Devraj and his father would go to far off places for the bear shows. And once when they were performing in a city, a robber accompanied by his wife and an unwell infant son threatened to take their money. Seeing his sick child, Devraj offered him the medicines instead of the booty, after which the child soon recovered. The highly impressed robber gave him this Osaka Expo memorial coin pendant which he had stolen from a Japanese tourist (101).

Disaster Narrative and *Hundred Years Mud*: Ecocriticism is the study of the human relationship with nature. It deals with the role of literature in describing a simple relation of dependence of human beings upon nature, making readers aware about their environment and its concerns, or to more complex themes like using nature metaphorically in the social and cultural realm. It is an interdisciplinary approach, the studies of which range from socio-political to scientific to the representation of environmental concerns and ecological issues in literary works. Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) describes ecocriticism as the 'study of the relationship between literature and physical environment (p. xviii).' She further states that 'It takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the culture artefacts of language and literature...Literary theory examines the relation between writer, text and world. Eco criticism expands the notion of the world and includes the entire eco sphere.' She argues that 'nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body' (p. xxiii). Hence, it involves the study of literature and literary works from an ecological point of view, dealing with the themes of nature and the environment.

The unprecedented rains which lead to the inundated Chennai have been attributed to the climate change and flooding of river to the unchecked construction and encroachment of the river beds and water bodies. Studies are indicative of the far-reaching ecological impact and environmental concerns of this 'man-made disaster'. Along with evacuating the stranded people from the flood struck area, the rescue workers faced the challenge of clearing the overthrown mud on the roads. *Hundred Years Mud* uses the mud accumulation on Adyar bridge as its backdrop. However, the ecological concerns about the river don't find much reference except once in the work, where the narrator describes Adyar river as a dumping ground of the city.

Adyar river, before the full-fledged monsoon was a typical city sewer. Every time I crossed the bridge, I was hit by a strong stench. Blinking and looking with partly closed eyes I saw the river banks scattered with massive garbage, on both sides of the sandbar lies the stagnant grey water. The tremendous amount of untreated sewage of five million inhabitants of Chennai city drains into the Adyar and other major rivers and canals of the city every day, meandering into the Bay of Bengal. (12)

Disaster discourse in Ecocritical studies transacts with a calamity or a catastrophe. The works sometimes deal with the disaster from an apocalyptic view, or explore the reasons for it and the losses it incurred, and yet other cases amplify the narrative with imaginative ideas deriving aesthetic pleasure from it. Gabriele Durbeck (2012) indicates that this narrative style includes a ‘fundamental tension between the aesthetic and ethical aspects of destruction’ (p.1). Based on this ‘tension’ between art and responsibility, Durbeck further categorizes the disaster narratives into i) apocalyptic scenarios and risk narratives, ii) narrative patterns and semantics of disaster narration and iii) the role of literature as a medium of cultural discourse. The semantics of disaster narration is to ‘enjoy catastrophe as an object of contemplation’ (p.2). In ‘narrative patterns and semantics’, Durbeck notes that ‘a distant spectator can actually enjoy catastrophe as an object of contemplation’ and the narrative is indicative of ‘distant and control’ (p.3). What Durbeck is indicating is perhaps the appropriation of disaster, which as Frijhoff (1997) argues is ‘never neutral, but rather an inharmonious, militant and polemical act, for it always entails coming to a conclusion that – by definition- excludes others’ (Jansen et al., 2022, p. 36-37). The narrator of *Hundred Years Mud* while gazing at mud from a distance, is deliberating on her past, her identity and her relationship with people. She observes the disaster unfolding and through the tropes of mud reminisces her past. However, she not only distances herself from the disaster but also feels fascinated at the visuals, deriving pleasures from them at times.

Textualizing Mud: While the narrator is at the bridge, her charged gaze is fixed at the ‘mud’, introspecting and observing it from a distance. She is distant and mute, yet a curious onlooker. Throughout the novel, the smell of the mud is repeatedly emphasized. Overwhelmed on witnessing the mud for the first time, the narrator in repulsion felt dizzy for few seconds (気が遠くなった, ki ga tōkunatta), and surrendered herself to its smell (この匂いに心身を開け渡してしまったらしい, kono nioi ni shinshin o akewatashite shimattarashii) (13). In ‘surrender’, she is ‘testing the boundaries of self against and outside medium’ (Slovic, 1996, p.353), ‘mud’ and ‘realize who they are (*she is*) and what’s what in the world’ (emphasis mine), confronting her own identity.

The mud and memories are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative of *Hundred Years Mud*. The story progresses as the narrator proceeds across the bridge and ends when she has crossed it. Nostalgic memories, prompted by the items, play a significant role as they appear in episodic fashion, scattered in parts. The narrator identifies herself with her past which defines her individuality. She is conscious about her speechlessness and her incommunicative behaviour and looks inwards for the solution. There are complex layers to her identity. She is being called as ‘unsocial’ (愛想のない女, aisō no nai onna) by her ex-husband and boyfriends. She tries to trace the roots and arrives at a conclusion that the reason perhaps lies in her relationship with her mother as they hardly engaged in any conversation (46), however expresses no qualms about it. She recalls the touch she felt when she would sit with her mother with their backs together (84). Her mother had a strong influence on her that it was only after her death that the narrator goes through identity crises and questions her existence with a ‘why’ (<なぜ>が私を見つけ出す, naze ga watashi o mitsukedasu) as she recounts, ‘what matters to me is the things not said, the words that could have been there. The silent moments I spent with my mother will never come back, after I was born into this world. before the ‘why’ found me.’ (85-86). The mother’s death was the life altering event, and the consequent ‘why’ triggered her self- doubt when people asked her the reason for her unresponsiveness. She comes to realize that the ‘words which were not spoken, things which might have happened’ matter to her. The memories and experiences of the past continue to shadow the narrators’ present and shape her identity (crisis). She further questions within herself the meaning



of the phrases like 'unsocial' and 'charming' (p.85), indicating a quest for female identity and a critique of Japanese society with its deep-rooted discrimination against women to be cute (*kawai*), amenable and docile.

These memories of the past triggered by the items the narrator imagines to be emerging from the mud, intertwined with her relationship with other characters like parents, classmates, husband, boyfriends, though appear to be disconnected and fragmented, yet delineated with undertones constructing the narrator's sense of self. It is through the memories that the narrator confronts her past, and is able to grasp her sense of self and understands the present. On the bridge, gazing at mud and the people around her, she concludes that the 'hundred years mud' is nothing but 'the letter that was not written', scenery that was not seen, the song which was not heard....life which could have been, the life which could not be lived' (118). Hence, 'mud' is something which could have been but never was. She sees Indians finding their long-lost acquaintances inside the mud, confessing, profusely apologizing, and forgiving each other for their past faults (117). She imagines her boyfriend who had left her also emerging out of the mud and she comes to realize that she doesn't harbour any resentment against him anymore.

Mud is stagnant, sticky, and it holds things. The narrator sees that carrying the weight of those memories means getting trapped in the past. Mud, 'an object of contemplation' (Durbeck, 2012, p. 2) is depicted both metaphorically and literally in the work. It includes both external mud which is natural and physical, and the symbolic internal mud which is mental and psychological emanating from the memories. The entire episode at the bridge encountering and visualising items from the past evokes an emotional response. Gazing at mud, the narrator receives her answers and she concludes that,

The various memories unravelled when the mementos like Yamazaki 12 years bottle, mermaid mummy came rolling out from the hundred years mud, those memories though they appeared to be mine, but then they seemed to be someone else's. In fact, earlier in my life, perhaps since I lost my mother, I could not feel the reality in parts of my life. However, I could not help but think that our lives, no matter from where we dig it up, are barely made up by pasting and the patch work of innumerable other lives, through all kinds of obstacles. I felt disappointed when I thought that I came all the way to South India to understand this fact. (123)

Indicating that humans don't live in a vacuum and live many lives, and that their lives are affected and influenced by others, the narrator concludes that she need not be apologetic about her individuality anymore⁷. Towards the end, Devraj is seen throwing the items back into the thundering Adyar river, liberating the narrator from the past memories. Mud is depicted both as a 'site' as well as 'gaze', to come to terms with oneself and arriving at the life lessons. Mud in *Hundred Years Mud* is a symbolic representation of past memories the narrator is stuck with. Mud in nature, a blend of rainwater, river water, and debris, is an outcome of certain processes. However, in *Hundred Years Mud*, a 'defamiliarization and symbolic transformation' (Zapf, 2006, p.53) of the mud takes place as mud is transformed from an outcome to a creator, a source, an active site for nostalgic memories. Navigating her way through the mud and the memories, the narrator crosses

⁷ Elaborating further on this point, in her commentary on *Hundred Year Mud*, Ishii argues the meaningless in obsession with 'i' or 'self' (「わたし」とか「個」に執着することの無意味さ, ('*watashi*' toka '*ko*' ni *shūchaku* suru koto no muimisa) (Ishii, 2021: 91)

the bridge, and jumps off it (飛び降りる, tobi oriru) (125), leaving behind both the physical as well as the psychological mud, liberating herself from the past, the fractured identity and thereby achieving self-awareness. The bridge symbolises the journey and transition from her past to present, and also perhaps from old to new self.

Mud symbolises stagnancy, whereas the river symbolises flow and life. The third element is sand at the river or seashore. Both the narrator and her mother had a habit of watching their footsteps in the sand to confirm their existence. Sand epitomizes acceptance. On the one hand is the river sand in Japan which accepts the footmarks, while on the other is the thundering Adyar, which excavates deep hidden memories. As indicated by Glotfelty (1996) that 'human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and getting affected by it' (xix), nature is deeply embedded in the disaster narrative of *Hundred Years Mud* and the metaphorical expressions of nature seem to be imparting life lessons. Interestingly, reminiscing her childhood memories of playing around Yodo river in Osaka with her mother, Ishii describes the river as her 'starting point' (原点, genten) and that image is an indelible memory of her childhood (原風景, genfūkei)⁸. The imagery of mud, river, and sand as static, continuity and acceptance, indicates that the text of *Hundred Years Mud* is not so much about the calamity or the disaster, but as much about the narrators coming to terms with her past in a transnational setting.

Hundred Years Mud is about unravelling the mysteries of the past. The Disaster Narrative utilizes and projects the landscape, the mud as a site to substantiate the framework of the storyline. It not only appropriates mud but the entire landscape to arrive at its conclusion. The disaster is portrayed as a spectacle, fitting the writers' 'worldviews and convictions' (Jansen et al., 2018, p.37). The disaster is appropriated as a motif crafting a backdrop for the life learning lessons. The depiction of mud and flood is controlled by the author and the narrative is her interpretation of mud. It is not nature in its natural form which brings devastation and destruction, but rather nature, a disaster which is subservient to authors writing and which is textualized and objectified in the writing process.

Indicating that appropriation of disasters contains 'representation' and 'identification', Jansen et al. (2018) argue that 'actors appropriate disasters: they attach their own meaning to catastrophic events in order to make them fit their narratives and navigate feelings and thoughts about these events in relation to the communities they they feel part of. More specifically, contemporaries produce representations of disasters and invite and encourage others to identify themselves- through these representations- with specific groups in society' (37-38). The narrator present on the bridge, reconstructs specific tropes of mud, disaster and Indians. She identifies by limiting herself to the role of observer and by not becoming a part of the scene. There is a distance between her and the landscape. While the narrator is lost in deep contemplation and reflection, the textual representation of the disaster narrative for Indian natives carries different undertones. The narrator projects them as happy go lucky people, smiling, who seem to be barely impacted by the calamity. Amidst constant action, they are either busy taking pictures, selfies, humming a song, crying, or conversing with the discovered lost ones, in contrast to herself, a mute spectator.

Conclusion: The web of memories of the distant past, intertwined with the present constitute the plot of *Hundred Years Mud*. Narrated in the first person mostly as a monologue, *Hundred Years Mud* is based on the real natural disaster, but it's a work of fiction, written through

⁸ Winner's Interview, Ishii Yuka: After Studying Buddhism at University of Tokyo, I went to India with my Husband, *Bungeishunju*, 2018(3) p. 332- 337.



the prism of mud. Nevertheless, through the winning of two coveted literary awards, the novel has certainly familiarized the relatively unknown city⁹ and the much-unreported floods among Japanese readers. *Hundred Years Mud* was published two years after the Chennai floods in which more than four hundred people lost their lives and many more were displaced. Economic as well as environmental impact was brought to light. Incessant rains and ensuing floods had affected the entire state of Tamil Nadu, particularly Chennai city, and impacted the livelihood of thousands of people. However, such reporting or the ecological concerns hardly receive any ink in the work. On witnessing the flooded streets and the mud, the narrator is neither distressed nor helpless, rather in the opening sentence of the work, she writes 'Though it has been just three and a half months of my life in Chennai, I may perhaps be called 'fortunate' (果報者, kahōmono) as I could experience once in a hundred years flood' (3). The narrator describes herself as 'fortunate' not because she survived the calamity, but because she could witness something, a 'natural disaster' which happens only once in a hundred years. These opening lines set the tone for the novel, indicating the detached spectator who is 'flirting with the catastrophe while remaining sure of security.' (Kerridge, 2000, p.248).

The disaster narrative of *Hundred Years Mud* is 'verbalizing personal experience' (Slovic, 1996, p. 352) of the narrator, rather than account of the calamity. For the narrator, belonging to the snow country of Japan, the realm of 'mud' is a distinct form of nature altogether which perhaps she has never experienced, eventually exposing her to the 'awareness of self and non-self'. As Scott Slovic (1996) rightly puts it in his essay, 'by confronting "face to face" the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its "otherness", the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown (p.352). This 'otherness' is double fold and even more complex in *Hundred Years Mud*. Not only is the mud of this scale beyond the imagination of the woman brought up in snow country, but this 'otherness' and 'unknown' is further intensified by the fact that it doesn't belong to her homeland.

As the narrator who seems to be deriving 'aesthetic pleasure' by romanticizing the catastrophic view unfolding in front of her eyes, the narrative of *Hundred Years Mud* is detached and distant from the disaster. It not only results in distancing its readers from the real picture but has also influenced the way the flood-affected city and its people would be visualized in the public memory of Japanese readers.

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⁹ On hearing Chennai for the first time, the narrator mistook the city for Thai city, Chiang Mai (7)

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