

Japanese Alice: A Quest for Meaning in Osaki Midori's "Wandering in the Realm of Seventh Sense"

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Have you ever seen Nobody? What would your world be like if objects had no names? Can you remember what will happen the week after next? How many impossible things can you believe before breakfast – if you hold your breath and shut your eyes?

These are the questions that Roger W. Holmes poses to the reader at the beginning of his essay on "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (199). These questions, he marks, transport us to the world of Lewis Carroll – but they also transport us to the realm of philosophy.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" is full of unexpected encounters and weird conversations, which might seem funny to children – the original intended audience. Still, one doesn't need to be a philosopher to see Carroll's fascination with logic shine through. Sometimes the readers are presented with an introduction to a principle, as in the conversation between Alice and Cheshire Cat about madness, or are puzzled with a complex problem, for instance, on the nature of names, as in a famous exchange between Alice and the White Knight. The White Knight offers to sign Alice a song, and a discussion about the nature of names and how the name relates to the object emerges:

'Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?' Alice said, trying to feel interested.

'No, you don't understand,' the Knight said, looking a little vexed. 'That's what the name is called. The name really is "The Aged Man."'

‘Then I ought to have said “That’s what the song is called,”?’ Alice corrected herself.

‘No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The song is called “Ways and Means”: but that’s only what it’s called, you know!’

‘Well, what is the song, then?’ said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

‘I was coming to that,’ the Knight said. ‘The song really is “A-sitting on a Gate...” (216-217)

In his analysis of this conversation, Roger W. Holmes points out that the name and the song itself are separate; therefore, the White Knight operates with four ideas: what the name is, what the name is called, what the song is, and what the song is called (204). To a modern reader acquainted with the idea of a sign, a signified as a mental concept (and not the thing itself) and the arbitrariness of the sign, this conversation would be a clever illustration of the main principles of semiotics, but neither groundbreaking nor nonsensical. Still, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” was published in 1865, and “Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There” – in 1872, which made the publication precede Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics” four to three decades, thus making the ideas behind Carroll’s playfulness with language highly unusual to a Victorian reader, a product of a sharp mind rather than coincidental wordplay.

Indeed, while both Carroll’s novels technically belong to the genre of literary nonsense and some critics argue that Carroll, together with Edward Lear, created the nonsense literary style “as a style unique to Victorian England and one that is governed by its own strict rules” (Jones, Gladstone 53), other critics, one of them Peter Heath, emphasize that “Jabberwocky,” a poem appearing in “Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There” is the only actual nonsense piece in “Alice” dilogy (Heath 47). Nonsense – because the “difficult” words don’t make sense in English, the poem still makes “alliterative sense” to the reader. At the same time, Alice is unprepared for the world through the looking-glass: she lives in a world where language is used loosely, while beyond the looking-glass, language is one constant which gives an order to chaos and therefore is never used loosely. The formal logic

and order behind the looking-glass are in contrast with the world we live in, and from that perspective, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues, it is our world that doesn't make sense, not the world created by Carroll. (324)

Semiotics and nonsense are only one of the many existing critical approaches to "Alice" dilogy, which include biographical, Freudian, psychedelic, and erotic fantasy. All of them focus on the character of Alice, the interpretation of the world around her, and her relationship with this world, offering a plethora of interpretations. This article attempts to apply this approach to a recently "re-discovered" work by Osaki Midori, "Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense."

I.

The novel "Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense" is told by a narrator and a protagonist Ono Machiko, who has come to Tokyo to live in an "odd family" of her two older brothers, Ono Ichisuke and Ono Nisuke, and her cousin, Sada Sangorō. While she was asked to come as a cook for her three brothers, she is also on a secret mission – to "write poems that would reverberate in the human seventh sense" (224). Osaki's fascination with numbers is noticeable here. All male members of the household have names that include numbers one to five (the name Sangorō contains characters for numbers three and five, while four is omitted, most likely, as an unlucky number). At the end of the novel, Machiko meets (and presumably falls in love with) Yanagi Kōroku, a doctor who works in a hospital together with one of her brothers and whose name includes the number six. Finally, Machiko is looking for the elusive seventh sense. This preoccupation with numbers is similar to both "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass," starting with Alice's exchange during the mad tea party about the nature of numbers, multiple representations of algebraic principles; and ending with attentiveness to prices seen in some of the characters. Of course, the circumstances of numbers being an important plot-developing tool in "Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense" and both Carroll's novels are quite different – Carroll was a mathematician, and even though he used math to both educate a younger audience and paint a satire on Victorian society, his main interest was supposedly in the adult audience to whom he presented

concepts of algebra. In “Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense,” too, the numbers appear in different contexts – characters perform experiments that require precise measurements; prices and numbers of repetitions of specific actions are often given, as when Sada Sangorō recounts his day at music school, he goes on to explain that he performed three times and was praised after each time. And while Machiko wanders through numbers in the hope of getting to the number seven (“human seventh sense”), she doesn’t stop to ponder the nature of numbers, and the interactions between characters cannot be interpreted as metaphors for algebraic problems.

Every household member, including Machiko, is devoted to a different field of study. Machiko studies poetry, reading from her minimal collection of poetry books during mornings and between cooking duties. Ono Ichisuke, the older brother, works in a hospital for people with schizophrenia and is fascinated with various forms of schizophrenia (*bunretsu shinrigaku*) – to the extent that he eagerly diagnoses his brother. Ono Nisuke is a student writing a dissertation about fertilizers. He tries to make infertile soil grow radish and does extensive experimentation in his room, prompting other household members to “seek shelter” elsewhere, as his experiments include boiling down excrements. As a side project, he works on moss fertility, or, as Nisuke calls it, “Changes in the Loving Feelings of Plants Induced by Fertilizer Temperatures” (the title of his work). Sangorō, the last member of this family, is pursuing music – he is a student at a preparatory music school, but even though he has exams to pass, he is not that concerned with his studies. His mood changes often; his results are uneven – according to him, his teacher scolds him one day and praises him the next; he doesn’t have a place and time to practice music – which Machiko, upon arrival, finds to be exaggerated circumstances of his current life situation. Still, because of these issues, Sangorō often skips school and occasionally sings opera instead of pitching exercises.

According to translators Kyoko Selden and Alisa Freedman, the characters’ interests reflect fields rapidly developing in pre-war Japan, inspiring Osaki’s literature – science, psychology, music, and poetry (222). While these are mostly unrelated fields, characters in “Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense” find ways to combine unrelated elements of each interest into one discourse. For instance, in the following quote Nisuke and

Sangorō briefly discuss the radish Nisuke is growing after Sangorō expresses doubt that he will be willing to eat ohitashi made with radish grown in the fertilizer:

“How sad. You people always need to be enlightened. There is nothing as sacred as fertilizer. And human excrement is the most sacred kind. Try comparing the sacredness of excrement and of that of music.”

“How can one even compare music and excrement?”

“Look, between excrement and music –”

“That’s not what I mean. Between music and excrement –”

“Tolstoy, among others, said that music stimulates obscene passions. And he sprinkled fertilizer over his farm.”

“But Beethoven said –” (232)

In this short passage, fertilizer, music, and literature are entangled in one conversation. Surely, as the characters are all interested in such different fields, conversations like this are not unusual. Each character is not rigidly pursuing only their own studies – Nisuke finally decides to study music to help in his work; Sangorō helps Nisuke with his experiments, collecting manure and assisting him during night study sessions; Machiko is interested in both Ichisuke and Nisuke’s work, secretly reading the notebooks of the latter; she is also quite supportive of Sangorō’s music ambitions, having told him about her dream to become a poet and having made a pact with him to strive for excellence in each their chosen field. Conversations in a household like this are bound to have an interdisciplinary flare to them, but what we repeatedly see in “Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense” is not just interdisciplinarity or extravagance. How characters approach their work, as well as the subfield itself, is highly unconventional. Ichisuke diagnoses his patients with fictional types of schizophrenia based on behavior that can only be seen as normal, such as refusal to answer questions (concealment-type schizophrenia) or stubbornness (persistence-type schizophrenia). Nisuke’s research papers on moss and radish, quoted by Machiko, read more like sentimental poetry and prose than an academic work:

But somehow I could not confide in Sangorō that I had been reading these research papers. The one on moss happened to be the kind I wished to keep quiet about having read because it was entirely comprised of passages like “a plant’s loving sentiment is something that can be ignited artificially by adjusting the temperature of fertilizer,” “even the moss that has the coldest appearance of all vegetation can this finally demonstrate its love’s passion,” and “the situation of the propagation of moss in this fertile soil is...”

The preface to the section on radish was indeed a lyric poem born of Nisuke’s broken heart. It began with the confession: “I once fell in love with a particularly lovely girl.” It continued: (240)

Machiko next quotes a long passage describing how Nisuke came to study fertilizers. Having fallen in love with a “girl of many tears” and having had his heart broken, Nisuke went on to stay at the temple at the foot of Mount Wasteland, where he was mistaken for a famous scholar and asked to lecture the villagers on the topic of soil fertility. Having cut his stay short, Nisuke returned to Tokyo with a handful of infertile soil, determined to make crops grow on it. The passage ends with a statement: “I will discuss this process [*experimenting with fertilizers*] in the text that follows. End of preface.” (241)

While Nisuke is unsuccessful in fertilizing the soil, he manages to cross-fertilize moss with pollen. Thus many conversations revolve around the moss and “moss love.” This is how Sangorō, Ichisuke, and Nisuke weigh in on the topic:

Anyway, Nisuke is about to finish a pot’s worth of his research into moss’s love. The moss on his desk began to fall in love tonight. (239)

Since humans fall in love, there is no reason that moss can’t. One could almost say that human love is inherited from moss. According to the theory of evolution, moss is mankind’s remote ancestor. That is correct. As a proof, for example, when about to wake up from a nap, humans sometimes find themselves feeling like moss. It is a strange

psychological state like feeling stuck to a damp, marshy place, unable to move at all. That is certainly evidence that mankind still retains a moss-like sensation. (243)

The personification of moss in the examples above is not solely the narrator's but all character's doing, which might be explained by the fact that all characters suffer from unrequited love. This prompts the characters to attach to moss the only human-like characteristic important to them – the ability to fall in love. In their eyes, moss is succeeding in what humans failed at. This personification is a distinctive feature of Osaki's work, also appearing in the short story "A Night at Anton's Basement," in which a troubled poet loses the distinction between himself and tadpoles.

However, comparing moss's love life to that of the characters has more functions than hinting at the characters' broken hearts. All the examples above show that the characters don't simply talk about each other's fields – they are mixing the fields, creating a patchwork of intellectual activity quite far from the actual academic work. Nisuke uses a story of his unrequited love as a preface to his research paper, while the other paper, according to Machiko, is heavily decorated with flowery phrases. As seen above, the two brothers use the same poetic language to discuss human evolution. Furthermore, in the first example above, the brothers discuss excrements and music, drawing parallels between them in a way that can only be read as ironic.

With the help of irony, Osaki Midori destroys something that can be called "scientific discourse." The two characters who are supposed to be scientists are caught up in the world of the chaos of knowledge. It is a world where "science," "art," "research," and "music" exist as words (and therefore, the characters try to pursue their respective fields), but the words lack meaning. Human emotions are inherited from moss, which can fall in love; scientific papers resemble sentimental love stories; and, as seen in the example below, moss suffers from schizophrenia:

Here I must explain the bitter psychology that I experienced during this research. Namely, I spent an anxious several days leading to this flowering. The moss was about to flower, but it did not. It was about to

fall in love, but it did not. These were indeed apprehensive days. My plant's hesitation and vacillation caused me to harbor a certain suspicion. I suspected: can it be that my plant has fallen ill with schizophrenia? A, can it be that it is absorbed in hesitation and vacillation because it is a schizophrenic patient? (267)

In the world of "Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense," fields of study are simply labels and categories that characters force themselves into but surpass later, which attracts the reader's attention to the fact that labels and "the real thing" are different. In other words, the novel draws attention to the language itself while ridiculing the seriousness of scientific discourse. This "lightness-heartedness" of Osaki Midori has been noticed by many researchers, and it's similar to that of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," but with a difference – while "Alice" is read as a dream sequence as well as a riddle and has more stylistic features with children's literature than with adult novels, "Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense" with its preoccupation with romantic love has a lot in common with girl's novels, or "*shōjo shōsetsu*," written for an older audience.

II .

So far, the focus of discussion was on the three male characters and their peculiar reality, in which general concepts related to their fields of study are treated quite freely, as seen in types of schizophrenia, according to Nisuke, or diagnosing moss with schizophrenia, for instance. Next, Machiko's perspective, both as a narrator and as a character, deserves a closer look.

As mentioned above, Machiko is often discussed in the context of "*shōjo shōsetsu*," particularly because of the repeated motif of sentimental romantic love and a heroine caught up in a love triangle. However, Machiko is not a traditional *shōjo* heroine in the strictest sense. The first difference concerns her look – in "*shōjo shōsetsu*," particular attention was paid to the physical look of the female characters, often with illustrations, which described and pictured *shōjo* as well-dressed, with beautiful hair and large eyes. Machiko, on the other hand, describes herself as "a girl with frizzy, terribly reddish hair" (224), which her grandma asks her to straighten to look like girls in the

capital. These girls in the capital might be the ideal heroines from "*shōjo shōsetsu*," but Machiko definitely doesn't think of herself as a heroine when she says, "I used to feel restrained by my hair" (224). Even her full name, Ono Machiko, is an anagram for Ono no Komachi, a legendary poet of great beauty from the Heian period – and Machiko herself is aware of, and restrained by, this comparison:

My full name is Ono Machiko, but because this is the kind of name that behooves a woman of great beauty, it made me uncomfortable to ponder it. Nobody would imagine that a name like this would belong to a skinny, red-haired girl. So I thought that I should come up with a name better suited to my poetry and to myself once my thick notebook was filled with poems. (225)

Another reason why it is difficult to call Machiko a typical "*shōjo shōsetsu*" heroine is the narration of her emotions – or, in this case, the lack of them. Machiko, like other members of the household, suffers from unrequited love and seems to be in love with two people – Sangorō, her cousin, who seems to also feel attracted to her, and Yanagi Kōroku, whom she met only once on a "late autumn night of no particular significance when I fell in love" at the end of the novel. In spite of Machiko's complicated love life, the narration of her emotions is scarce, especially compared to sentimental novels the motif of romantic love might be a parody of. The following paragraphs quote the most emotional moment for the narrator – when she sees Sangorō with a neighbor:

Sangorō and my neighbor stood under Nisuke's jacket, separated by the hedge.

I tried to do the work Nisuke had ordered, as my tears kept falling on the dirt. When Sangorō came near, my tears refused all the more to stop, so I handed him the tool and walked toward the jacket.

When Sangorō entered the maid's room, I was unable to lift my face, which I buried in my kimono sleeves on the desk. After standing in the room for a while, he picked up the jacket from my side, took a breath, and left. Each time he returned, I remained in the same state. (265)

The fact that Machiko is crying after seeing Sangorō with another girl is one of the few clues into Machiko's feelings that the reader is offered, and even here, she does not narrate her feelings – she rather calmly states that her “tears kept falling on the dirt.” This comes in sharp contrast to “*shōjo shōsetsu*,” in which the emotions of a heroine, who is an epitome of feminine virtues, are the main focus of the narrative and are often presented in the form of internal monologue and narrated with the use of flowery and sensual language (Takahashi 115).

Instead of narrating her emotions, Machiko pays close attention to sensations, more specifically to how something feels on the skin, smells, and looks. For instance, having her hair cut, which was an emotional moment for her, the narrator is concerned with how her head feels or with her exposed neck:

The moment the scissors made their last sound by my left ear, I sprang up and ran into Sangorō's room, which was still dark. My neck was suddenly so cold that I felt as if I had been stripped of all my clothing. A dark room was the only place for such a cold neck – One cold breeze after another blew past my neck. (236)

Unsure if my head felt light or heavy, I had to keep shaking it. So my reading did not proceed smoothly. My hair was hidden under the many folds of the long black cloth, the ends of which were tied and drooped behind to protect my chilly neck. But how my head felt like a borrowed object – I shook it a number times, while my book remained at the same page on the dining table. (250)

It was already morning outside, and if I went out to draw water from the well, the late autumn morning sun would instantly shine on my neck. (250)

However, I did not find any clear insights, my neck feeling somehow strange. (251)

This style of narrative, in which the narrator is much more focused on physical sensation, has a purpose within the world of the novel – Machiko is looking for a “seventh sense,” so she often finds herself in situations where she is surrounded by and overcome with sensations: the scent of a towel, the aroma of the perfume, the stench of boiling manure mix with clouds of vapor from the manure, blur her vision and make her drifts into the world of dreams. However, another possible interpretation of the narrator’s attention to bodily sensation is, again, irony – Machiko objects to the demands of the fictional *shōjo* heroine on yet another level. While the *shōjo* heroine would focus on narrating the soul, Machiko narrates the body, thus lightly parodying the sentimentalism of the popular novels.

Machiko, therefore, doesn’t fit standards – not only of an ideal *shōjo* heroine but also standards of beauty and standards of a good housewife. Invited to the house in a position of a cook, Machiko often skips or forgets about her responsibilities, so sometimes her cooking is stretching the arm through the window or through shoji and getting an orange from a tree or a box of *hamanattō* for her brothers, and sometimes she lets them snack on random things:

Sangorō ate sugar and drank salt water. He ate seaweed and drank salt water. He alternated repeatedly, looking as if he found his food unappetizing. (246)

Here it is possible to draw another parallel between Alice and Machiko. Nina Auerbach suggests that Alice was written as a character who challenges traditional Victorian ideas about womanhood by being strong, taking matters into her own hands, and sometimes even being cruel. Auerbach explores Alice’s attitude towards animals in Wonderland and shows that Alice is cruel to them and to herself (to an animal inside herself) as well. By exploring the symbolism of Alice’s mouth, Auerbach suggests that Alice has all the power in Wonderland – she eats and drinks to change her size consciously, after all – and that one time when her growth is not caused by her will, it helps her avoid a dangerous situation. This way, the question of original guilt or

innocence is raised, and Alice is shown as a female child in a “troubled human condition,” which opposes traditional Victorian views on women and children (44). The character of Machiko, too, although in a different way, challenges how a young teenage girl was imagined – by authors (and readers) of *shōjo shōsetsu* and, more broadly, by Japanese society.

Another feature of “Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense” is the fact that the narration does not reflect the time order of events. The narrator tells the story from a point in the far future, as the time period of the novel is a “distant past” (224). This allows the narrator to jump to the end in the beginning, to intercept her narrative with letters and excerpts from the research paper, and generally regard time freely:

As Sangorō and I approached the house, I could see mandarin oranges a little over one centimeter in diameter growing on the trees that formed a hedge around it, shining in the sun and looking almost the same color as the leaves. I then realized that a net containing mandarin oranges still hung from my hand. Unaware, I still held the oranges I had not finished eating on the train. Anyway, how underdeveloped the mandarin oranges on the hedge were – they later turned into homegrown fruit, imperfect and shockingly behind the season, with bumpy skin and many pips and not much larger than two centimeters. They were sour. But they looked beautiful under the stars on a late autumn night, and, despite their sourness, they were later to help with Sada Sangorō’s love. He ate half of one of these two-centimeter oranges and gave the remaining half to the object of his affection. Partly because I need to tell my story in order, I will have to save the episode of Sangorō’s love for a later time.

In the quote above, the narrator recounts the time she was invited into the house and saw a mandarin orange tree not far from the house. This prompts the narrator to jump a few months ahead in time to when Sangorō fell in love with a neighboring girl. She starts telling a story about Sangorō’s love but forces herself to postpone. Another example of the interrupted narrative includes the narrator’s recount of her conversation with the neighbor, which is abruptly stopped by the following paragraph:

From that morning on, I no longer wrapped my head. When I awoke, the wrap was on the tatami in the maid's room, having fallen from my head. And I gave up covering my hair. The Bohemian necktie that Sangorō had bought, now just black fabric, lay in my basket together with my hair-care packets. (257)

Here, too, the narrator switches between the present (the point in time of the narrator) and the future, painting a patchwork of events for the reader rather than one linear story. In other places, her narration is interspersed with written materials, as in the example below, where Sada Sangorō's letter is quoted in parts:

Because Sangorō entered the house through the window by the *genkan* and opened the door right away, I stopped looking at the name cards and went into his room. But incidentally, that letter from Sada Sangorō continued: (226)

Two things are evident from these quotes. First, which is made clear in the first line of the novel, the narrator is telling her story from some point in the future. ("Some time in the distant past, I spent a brief period from autumn to winter as a member of an odd family" (224)). In this case, shifts in time or a dotted narrative might be attributed simply to the narrator's poor memory. However, her intention to put her narrative in line, "in order," reveals her desire to control her only mode of being – the narrative. However, she cannot do it entirely. The narrative escapes her, and the act of narration is beyond her complete control.

As the title of the novel suggests, Machiko is wandering in the realm of the seventh sense, eventually ending at the Yanagi Kōroku's house. She implies that he is a person with the most developed seventh sense. Machiko has been "wandering" (*hōkō* in Japanese), looking for a possibility to write poems that reverberate with the seventh sense, but the reader never learns the exact definition of what the seventh sense is.

Something that can be evoked and can be lost; something that can be created (for example, through poetry), something that can be navigated

(wandered through) but at the same time slips through the fingers. Machiko's wandering is a search for meaning, and her attempt to write poetry is an attempt to create this meaning for herself.

"Wandering in the Realm of the Seventh Sense" is a novel about the search for meaning within chaos. All characters have interests and pursue their own activities, but considering the way the narration parodies the seriousness of the scientific discourse, the actual function of the characters is to draw the readers' attention to the language and the meaning. This closely relates to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," which, according to Donald Rackin, can be read as a "frightful journey into an endless night" (453) – "a grimly comic trip through the lawless underground that lies just beneath the surface of our constructed universe" (454), or a journey through the chaos. Alice is able to survive in the chaos because, being a child, she possesses a child's curiosity and is not bound fully by social and linguistic conventions. In another interpretation, Alice remains victorious because of her refusal to meet the expectations of Victorian society.

Both these qualities of Alice translate to Machiko the character and Machiko the narrator. Machiko the character challenges the expectations of the readers (as *shōjo* heroine) and of Japanese society (with her looks and her actions), which liberates her from social conventions into the world of chaos. Machiko the narrator wanders in this chaos, which is reflected in the structure of the only state of being available to her, which is narration. The dotted, interrupted structure of her narrative reflects the chaos beyond not only the orderly world of logic and social roles and conventions but also the chaos beyond language. It is a world where emotions and internal monologues of *shōjo* heroines are not helpful in finding the meaning (they are just words, after all), so Machiko resorts to relying on bodily sensations to show her the way. However vague what she found, she did find it, so Machiko, as Alice, succeeded in leaving the chaos for good.

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