



Full Length Research Paper

# Bridging of different cultures through literature by Wendy Jones Nakanishi

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Wendy Jones Nakanishi, a Professor of English Language and Comparative Culture at a private college in Kagawa, western Japan, grew up in a tiny country town in the northwest corner of Indiana. Nakanishi has had an international education, earning a BA in English from Indiana University, an MA from Lancaster University in England, and a Doctorate in 18<sup>th</sup>-century English studies from Edinburgh University in Scotland. She has been published in America, Japan and Europe, and her research ranges from work on eighteenth-century English Literature to analyze of contemporary Japanese and British authors. Her academic work consists of critical monographs, articles and book reviews. She has also written many short stories and 'creative non-fiction' pieces drawn from her experience of living in Japan for the past thirty-two years, memoirs depicting her life as an American University Professor vividly, a foreigner married to a Japanese farmer in an emphatically homogenous culture, and the mother of three biracial sons. Her stories have appeared in various literary magazines in Japan and abroad. She has, lately, ventured into fiction, completing a novel, *Imperfect Strangers* (under the pen name of Lea O'Harra), issued in both digital and print versions in 2015 by Endeavour Press (UK), and in 2016 by Fine Line Press (New Zealand). *Imperfect Strangers* is the first volume in the so-called 'Inspector Inoue murder mystery series'; its sequel, *Progeny*, was published in print and digital form by Endeavour Press (UK) in June 2016. Nakanishi's writing is most valuable as a contribution to modern-day multiculturalism and, in this respect, her work contributes to the creation of a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations and cultures. Her literary work is a given that will represent literature with value as a bridge between cultures.

**Key words:** Wendy Jones Nakanishi's literary work and her biography, Japanese and American societies in her works

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## INTRODUCTION

A key to leading a happy life is the ability to exhibit tolerance and to live in peace with others. It may be that the cultivation of this virtue is especially recommended for the literary-minded expatriates – people who decide to write about different cultures based on their life experiences in the countries they have chosen to inhabit.

The importance of such literature by creative emigrant writers is that it offers an intimate perspective of a country and culture perceived as foreign to the writers, a viewpoint that is personal and objective. The author pens his/her own feelings and reactions while remaining distanced from what he/she describes and the work

becomes a source of information that can entertain and instruct readers with important literature. (Potočnik, 2012)

Wendy Jones Nakanishi is an American and a long-term resident of Japan. Her life experiences in her adoptive country are expressed vividly through her short stories, often taking the form of autobiographical fragments and her fiction, the two novels published recently. She is a good observer of the mysteries and contradictions inherent in Japanese culture and an author worth mentioning. In this article, I would like to analyze briefly the importance of her literary works and their contribution to the world's literature.

### **Growing up in the United States**

Wendy Jones Nakanishi was born on June 21st, 1954, in Indiana. She lived in the small town of Syracuse until she was three. Her father was an Assistant Cashier at the town's bank and her mother a housewife, a farmer's daughter from central Indiana. Wendy has an older brother and two older sisters.

When she was three, her family moved seventy miles north to a tiny Indiana town called Rolling Prairie.

Nakanishi's ambitious father had become the Manager of the town's sole bank. It was a „new start“ for them all, but their happiness was to be short-lived. In some of

Nakanishi's short stories, the author expresses her feelings about that time:

Behind the façade of the “happy family” that needed to be preserved in the hothouse environment of a small, gossipy town, ours was a household of underlying tension and quarrels. (Nakanishi, 2012c, p. 172)

Her parents quarreled often and, when Wendy was seven, they separated, with her father moving some thirty miles away to work at a bank in Michigan City. When she was nine, her parents divorced. Her father became the President of the bank in Syracuse where he once had been employed as the Assistant Cashier and, shortly afterwards, married a local Rolling girl. Wendy, her sisters and her brother all liked their stepmother, who moved with their father into an apartment in central Syracuse near the bank and the town library, where

Wendy's stepmother had found employment as its Librarian.

Wendy Jones Nakanishi then experienced a sad period of her life, as she explained in the course of an interview I conducted with her:

Things fell apart after my father left. Our house became shabby, cluttered, and dark and we felt quite poor in a way. We didn't have nice clothes and our mother rarely got up to prepare our

breakfasts or our school lunches. There was a sense of dislocation, too, from our visits to Syracuse. When we stayed with our father, we lived in his apartment near the bank, and he insisted on scrupulous tidiness and on our looking and behaving well. As my father and stepmother occupied two of the most important positions in the little community's social hierarchy, it was like settling into that town's upper class. It was an odd existence shuttling backwards and forwards, from one lifestyle to another that was completely different. I was depressed and felt life was very grey and that there was little to be hopeful about. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

I imagine my childhood friends would have characterized me as a girl who was lonely and shy, who dreaded attracting attention. This was especially true in the difficult years after my parents' divorce. (Nakanishi, 2006, p. 57)

Until Nakanishi was about thirteen she was doing badly academically as well as personally. She realized that things must change when she entered Junior High School. She knew that if anyone was going to change her life, it had to be her, so she started working harder at school and became a top student. In her final year of High School she experienced a sense of liberation. From being a shy girl with few friends, she had become a popular student who was the Editor of the School Yearbook and the President of its French Club. Just before graduating, she learned that she had been awarded two Scholarships, meaning she could study at Indiana University with few financial worries. She left Rolling Prairie at the age of eighteen, never to return for any length of time. She would only go back for short visits. As she later recalled:

I think it was probably a kind of inspiration. I felt that I had to make a change, and that I needed to escape from my own background. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

At Indiana University she was thrilled to be immersed suddenly in an interesting, challenging environment, rubbing shoulders with students from all over the world. She had left behind a tiny, occasionally claustrophobic small town, landing in a lively and vibrant intellectual community that she loved. She had been prepared for this transition by a trip she made to Europe shortly after graduating from High School, with all expenses paid by her father. Nakanishi feels her father was stingy emotionally and financially throughout his life, but she

would always be thankful for the one wonderful life-changing present he had bestowed on her, as she told me in my interview:

One thing my father did do for me and my two sisters was to treat us to a trip to Europe as a High School graduation present. I chose an excursion for High School students that provided for our seeing some of the sights in such countries as England, France, Austria and Italy and ended with a Mediterranean cruise. The trip lasted about two months, and I was with many other High School students from all over the States. When the plane landed at O'Hare (Chicago), I was the last person off; I just wanted to turn right around and return to Europe. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

Nakanishi realized then that she wanted travel and adventure in her life. At Indiana University, she eventually settled on English Literature as her major, and she returned to England when she was twenty to spend one year at Lancaster University as a „Junior Year Abroad“ student. After graduating from Indiana University, she went to Paris and got a job working as an au pair in a wealthy French household for three months. Her short story *One Day* that appears on the Internet Short Story Forum is based on this experience (Nakanishi, 2005b).

Later, Nakanishi rented an apartment and set up her own private Language School with an English friend. After a year in France, she returned to Lancaster and got her MA in eighteenth-century English Literature in 1978. Nakanishi graduated with first-class Honors, and her favorite Professor, Clive Probyn, urged her to continue her studies. Her father had refused to help her financially with her postgraduate studies, and she needed to return to America to work to repay the loan she had taken out for her year at Lancaster. She worked for six months as a Secretary at the Headquarters of Rotary International and then six months as a Secretary for the Economics Department at Northwestern University.

Knowing of her unhappiness with this life, an English friend urged her to give it all up and come and join him in Europe. Nakanishi quit her job and flew to Luxembourg, settling in the charming old university town of Groningen, in northern Holland, for six months. As Nakanishi's friend was applying to do a Doctorate at Edinburgh University, she applied for admission there herself, sending a copy of her MA thesis with her application. When she returned to America from Holland to find work for the summer, she was amazed and delighted to discover that Edinburgh had awarded her a full Scholarship. She has said that she will forever owe the deepest debt of gratitude to that university.

Nakanishi continued her studies of eighteenth-century

English Literature, researching the background of letters written and published by the poet Alexander Pope and writing her Doctoral Thesis on the contemporary context of his correspondence. The fates did not intend for her to rest comfortably in her beloved Britain. It happened that she saw a notice for a position for an Edinburgh Graduate at Tokushima Bunri University, in the Kagawa prefecture in Japan that would open in the spring of 1984. Nakanishi decided to apply for the job. This is the story of how and why Nakanishi first ventured to Japan, a country she admits, she knew nothing about at that time and had little interest in it.

Wendy Jones Nakanishi arrived in Japan in February 1984, having just completed her Doctorate at Edinburgh University. After first teaching for five years at Tokushima Bunri University, she landed a tenured position at Shikoku Gakuin University in Zentsuji and has been teaching there for the past twenty-seven years.

Nakanishi did not intend to stay in Japan but, two years after her arrival, she happened to meet the Japanese man she would marry a year later. She now lives in Kinashi, a western suburb of Takamatsu in the northeast of the island of Shikoku, with her husband and their three sons. As she recalls in one of her stories, she had felt initially dismayed by her new life in Japan, but meeting her future husband changed her feelings:

Never mind, I thought. It's only for a few years.

However, a chance encounter with a farmer changed all that, diverting my future in a direction I never could have predicted, let alone sought. (Nakanishi, 2005a, p. 290)

### As a Woman and a Foreigner in Japan

Wendy Jones Nakanishi enjoyed a pleasant life in her first three years' residence in Japan, as a single woman in a good job, earning a reasonable salary; Japan prizes academic qualifications highly and, as a foreigner, she was treated to automatic deference and respect. In retrospect, however, Nakanishi says she now understands it was a rather unnatural existence, that she was living the life of an outsider there at that time.

Until Nakanishi married a Japanese she had no appreciation of what it means to live in Japan as a Japanese. Once she had become „Mrs. Nakanishi,“ she experienced a clash of cultures. For one thing, as a westerner she had been raised with the idea that gratifying personal desires was natural, not reprehensible. The popular notion of „treat yourself, you're worth it“ she had often encountered in America and Europe needed to be discarded when Nakanishi became the wife of a Japanese. She came to realize that the individual in Japan is seen as rather unimportant compared to the group, whether that group represents the family unit or society at large. She learned that

individual desires often have to be sacrificed and that privacy is not much valued in Japan. This meant that a kind of personal transformation was required:

It was a really painful self-education and I am afraid that I inflicted an impression of my own spoiled personality on my in-laws. However, I have managed to change. I think I needed to grow up in ways that I probably couldn't or wouldn't have been forced to do in America or England, where that kind of self-education isn't required in daily life. Living here with my husband and children, I have had to learn the meaning of self-sacrifice, and this was especially true in raising my boys and in trying to help my in-laws and to adjust to their ways. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

Nakanishi also learned that there is still inequality in the way men and women are perceived and treated in Japan. Women continue to suffer from discrimination, leading Nakanishi to remark:

I didn't want a daughter unless she could live abroad because I felt women still had so many obstacles to overcome in Japan, so she would be struggling constantly. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

In the „old-style“ or traditional form of Japanese marriage, the husband is the principal wage earner. It is the custom for the husband to turn over his paycheck to his wife, and she doles out a small allowance to him for living expenses. The Japanese woman faces a difficult challenge in shouldering the huge responsibility of taking care of their children and education, and she is responsible for any problems the children encounter or failures they experience.

In Japanese society, the strongest tie within the Japanese family is held customarily to be that between a mother and her son. The father is usually employed full-time, works long hours, and does not spend much time at home with the family.

The Japanese mother traditionally has been idealized as a self-sacrificing, angelic soul „devoted to her children“, [who] always shows them affection, and is willing to sacrifice her own plans and desires on their behalf. (Masami, 1995, p.205)

What is the nature of the post-war Japanese nuclear family? The modern-day Japanese family has been characterized as a „father-absent system“. ... The Japanese full-time

employee is usually male and expected to put his duties as a worker above any responsibilities as a husband or father. The wife and mother also has a prescribed role to play. She is expected single-handedly to manage the household and its finances and take care of the children. (Nakanishi, 2010a, p.3)

According to research conducted by one of Nakanishi's students on Japanese and American husbands, the average Japanese man does six per cent of the family's housework and the American husband, forty-five per cent. In one of her stories, Nakanishi remarks on her own „good fortune“:

I know my own husband does more than most of his friends: he washes up the dishes every evening, he helps the children with their homework, he washes the cars, and, in winter, he keeps the log-burning cast-iron stove supplied with wood. (Nakanishi, 2008a, p.118)

In conservative old rural areas of Japan, a woman who consents to marry the *chonon* or oldest son of a farming family is expected to move in with his parents. Many such families still exist in Nakanishi's neighborhood. These families retain the custom that the eldest son of a farming family will continue to inhabit the family home after marriage; it is where he will bring his bride and where they will raise their children. It is his wife's duty to look after his mother and father as they grow older and to nurse them through any illnesses: „She must assume a subservient role in the household, waiting on and serving her in-laws“ (Nakanishi, 2012b). The farmer's wife is also supposed to assist her husband with the agricultural labor. In Nakanishi's case, as she says:

I have been exempted from this general rule as I am a foreigner, and my husband and I live in a log house down the road from Takehito's parents. (Nakanishi, 2012b)

I suspect I have only found [my life in Japan] bearable because again, as a foreigner and one who holds what is considered a high position in society as a University Professor, I have been exempted from some of these expectations. I rarely help with the farm work, and my husband and I have been able to construct our own home ... Still, we are expected to join in memorial services for Takehito's ancestors ... My husband is required to assist his parents on a nearly daily basis. (Nakanishi, 2008c, p. 131)

In general, however, this old generational system is now breaking down in Japan. Even in rural areas such as the

one Nakanishi and her family inhabit, many women are working, although they are still expected to manage their family's finances and the children's education. The old preference for a male child is disappearing. The common perception is that those privileges once attached to being male in Japanese society have largely vanished, with now only responsibilities and duties remaining.

Despite these recent changes, family life and personal relationships between family members are very different in Japan from those in America. The whole idea of the family is different. In Japan, the family unit is of utmost importance, and its power and significance lasts throughout any individual's life. In America, on the other hand, a child achieves independence at an early age. On reaching adulthood, he should be the chief architect of his own future, often moving far from the family home.

Some of Nakanishi's short stories focus on her struggle to come to terms with her in-laws' proximity and the prominent role they expect to play in her life (*The Mountain*):

I think I mentioned to you in one of my stories that, when my husband and I thought of marrying, he said that he was in a boat with his parents and that I could get in but he could not get out. I realized he meant that he is metaphorically and even literally bound to his parents until their deaths or until his own. ... The American child usually leaves home when he is about eighteen. There is such an emphasis on personal mobility in the States that very few people end up in the same town they grew up in whereas, here in Japan, or at least the part of it that I inhabit, generation after generation, many people remain in the same place. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

### **Nakanishi's Love for Literature: Her Working and Writing Career**

Wendy Jones Nakanishi has always immersed herself in literature and harbored writing ambitions from her earliest years:

I think that anyone who loves English literature or American literature or, of course, any kind of literature also has a longing to write it. I had this longing instilled in my consciousness from an early age. When I was in the fifth grade of my tiny school in Rolling Prairie, Indiana, I once wrote a short story called the „The Littlest Pioneer,” and my teacher praised it highly. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

When Nakanishi first entered Indiana University at the age of eighteen, she began studying for a degree in English Literature. The dream of doing some „creative” writing herself was cherished but suppressed as she busied herself with her academic career, embarking on a Master's Degree after completing her BA and then working on a Doctorate. When Nakanishi came to Japan and began a university job, she was preoccupied with preparing her lessons and then, with the birth of her three sons, with the demands and cares of motherhood. She published academic articles and book reviews but longed to write a play or novel. She began to write stories that she would classify as „creative non-fiction” based on her experiences as an American woman working in Japan as a University Professor while also the wife of a Japanese farmer and the mother of three boys. This writing became not only a source of great delight and amusement for her, but also represented a healing sort of exercise, a kind of catharsis. She confessed that she felt she needed to tell somebody about her experiences because:

... sometimes they have been painful or confusing. Writing them down is a sort of a release and a way of understanding what's happened to me. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

Nakanishi has worked as a full-time Professor at Shikoku Gakuin University in Zentsuji, Japan since 1988. She claims always to have enjoyed her work as a Professor, relishing the opportunity to share her broad knowledge of different cultures and intercultural relationships with her students. She has published a number of articles, critical monographs and short stories that reflect her research of literature and, in her „creative non-fiction” pieces, her life experiences in Japan. Her research into English, Japanese, and American literature ranges from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, focusing on such a variety of authors as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, John Ruskin, Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch, and Ariyoshi Sawako and Murakami Haruki. In recent years, she has begun writing academic essays on Japanese crime fiction.

Nakanishi has written not only about literature, but also about historical and sociological topics, publishing articles, for example, on the nineteenth and twentieth-century Arts and Crafts movements in Korea, Britain, and Japan, suicide in Japan, the position of women in Japan, and the recent *hikikomori* phenomenon of acute social withdrawal among Japan's young people. In the latter context, Nakanishi observes that:

*Hikikomori* is a Japanese term meaning “acute social withdrawal” that refers to a recent phenomenon among young Japanese, mostly

male, who choose to retire completely from public life and sequester themselves at home and usually in their own bedrooms. (Nakanishi, 2010a, p. 1)

As for the issue of suicide, Nakanishi has written several pieces speculating on the causes for Japan's boasting the dubious distinction of having one of the highest rates of it in the world. She feels that there are many motives for suicide in her adopted country. For a bullied schoolchild or one suffering from Japan's highly competitive educational system, suicide might be seen as the only means of escaping from a situation perceived as unbearable. There is also the suicide chosen as the means of repaying a perceived „debt“ or of expiating guilt. Suicide victims in Japan are usually young adults and mostly men:

Among Japanese aged 15 to 25 and those aged 40 to 54, suicide is the second leading cause of death. It is the leading cause of death for those aged 25 to 39, with the suicide rate of middle-aged men five times that of women. (Nakanishi, 2010a, p. 10)

As for Nakanishi's creative writing, most of it can be described as thinly disguised autobiography. In her short stories she draws upon her personal history, describing her life in Indiana, Britain, France and Japan. *My Mother's Daughter*, for example, is a story in which her ambiguous feelings are expressed regarding her mother. The relationship between them had grown problematic when Nakanishi was seven and her father left the family. The beautiful young woman she had cherished and admired as a little girl became a hateful figure:

After my father left it had been easy and useful to blame my mother for everything. I blamed her for the plunge in our living standards. I blamed her for losing the rich social life she had enjoyed as a wife of the town's Bank Manager. I blamed her for dating men I thought unsuitable but then, inconsistently, I also blamed her for remaining single. I blamed her for the messiness of our house. Only age and experience brought forgiveness, when I could recognize that it had been depression that caused the chaos in our household. (Nakanishi, 2008b, pp. 10-11)

In later life Nakanishi came to realize that her mother regarded her children as her greatest accomplishment, as her consolation for a life less than satisfactory or fulfilling. Some of Nakanishi's siblings chafed at this assessment, unwilling to attribute any success they had achieved in life to a parent they remembered as neglectful and self-absorbed, but Nakanishi found it a

source of solace to allow her mother this happiness, however delusional it might have been. As her mother grew older and eventually entered an Assisted Living Facility, her frequently expressed goal was to be reunited, at least once, with all her offspring and, when that reunion finally happened, in 2008, she was gleeful and relieved. Nakanishi's mother died shortly afterwards.

In caring for her own three boys – in becoming a mother herself – Nakanishi feels she was able to value her mother in a new and deeper way. In particular, she appreciates the unconditional love and support her mother always showed her, which she feels is the greatest gift that a parent can give a child. Her fondest memories now are of the times when her mother was like a child herself playing, for example, with her children in the snow or bidding them to join her in looking at a particularly beautiful moon. Nakanishi can grasp how warm-hearted her mother had been, an individual who bestowed and received love freely. Nakanishi recollects how her mother insisted on hugging and kissing, how she often praised her children, and how she always told them how much she loved them. Nakanishi's mother professed herself their greatest fan, as Nakanishi recalls in her story about her:

Now that I'm a mother myself, I see my own mother in a much different way than I had as recently as twenty years ago. I love her. I hope my own children will think of me as fondly. (Nakanishi, 2008b, p. 13)

In Nakanishi's other stories the reader can also picture the writer's life story vividly and empathize with her experiences. In *The Mountain*, for example, she describes the simple outlines of her life in Japan:

I have been resident in Japan for the past thirty years. I live in a rural area with my Japanese farmer husband, Takehito and our three boys. Our house is on the outskirts of Takamatsu on the island of Shikoku, and in an enclave of my husband's relatives; his parents, a brother and his family, his aunts and uncles. (Nakanishi, 2010c, p. 107)

The writer describes the family life she enjoys there, her pride in her three sons, her love for her husband and her respect for her in-laws. She asserts that she and her husband could not have had a more dissimilar upbringing or been raised in more different cultures, which makes it even more remarkable that they share a similar system of values. She says that, for example, they both love jazz and wine and the „simple life,“ and simple pleasures. They also both longed for children, and this formed an important part of their initial attraction, meeting by chance when Nakanishi was thirty and her husband three years

older. Nakanishi describes her feelings for her „improbable“ soul mate in *Sons and Mothers* and in *A Life in a Day*:

I came to Japan for a job. I was already thirty when I began work at a small private university here. When I met Takehito, I was longing to settle down, and he felt the same. (Nakanishi, 2009b, p. 34)

On our way home, I am afforded the occasional glimpse of his face as illuminated by streetlights and by stone signs. A harsh face; a kind heart. Doubly incomprehensible as a man and as a Japanese. Completely reliable. Inexpressibly dear. (Nakanishi, 2008a, p. 119)

Nakanishi feels that Takehito was the one who managed to repair her broken heart and mend her spirit when she suffered from loneliness and disillusion some years after she first came to Japan, when she was suffering from the heartache of the break-up of a long-term romantic relationship. Takehito came at the right time, a solemn-faced young Japanese farmer whose arrival in her life represented a kind of “stitch in time” that prevented its unraveling any further (Nakanishi, 2012a, p. 180).

After marrying my Japanese farmer, Takehito, we settled in Kinashi, an area west of Takamatsu famed for its bonsai trees. My husband worked with his parents, growing oranges, flowers and greenhouse grapes. He built us a big wood house surrounded by trees and a tall hedge. I began to feel at home in a part of the world that has been inhabited by my husband’s forebears for hundreds of years ... (Nakanishi, 2012c, p. 175)

Being thrown into intimate relations with her husband’s family, kindly strangers divided from her by culture and by language, Nakanishi came to love and to respect her „Japanese parents“. She was particularly intrigued by her mother-in-law, or, in Japanese, „Okaasan“ (Mother) and she wrote a story about her that was published subsequently in *The Kyoto Journal*:

Okaasan has had a difficult life if one typical of Japanese women of her age and background. She was born on a farm some three miles from the one she now inhabits with my father-in-law. There were many brothers and sisters. Life was hard: an endless round of backbreaking physical labour, with holidays providing the only respite from the usual strenuous routine. (Nakanishi, 2001b, p. 11)

Nakanishi’s father-in-law was the subject of *Otoosan*, a

story written eight years later, dedicated to the memory of her husband’s father, who had died in 2009 at the age of eighty-seven. This tale focuses on the story of „Otoosan“ (Father) and the turbulent times he experienced in his lifetime and Otoosan’s life-long dedication to growing oranges on the remaining land. The story honors him as a hardworking man whose strenuous labors only ceased with serious illness and then death.

„Otoosan,“ the Japanese for „father,“ had been seriously ill. When I married Takehito over twenty years ago I had encountered, in his father the traditional Japanese *hatarakimonohito*, an individual whose whole life revolved around work. (Nakanishi, 2010b, p. 207)

One day, when her father-in-law was in his final illness, she visited him in the hospital. She watched in horror as his sinewy hands, hardened by labor, the same hands that she had seen picking oranges, pruning trees, weeding the garden, and expertly fashioning rice cakes, now set themselves to their new task; they were attempting to get out of the hospital by

gripping the bars of the bed and shaking them, or tugging at his clothes. (Nakanishi, 2010b, p. 210)

When Otoosan died and a Buddhist service was held for him. Nakanishi describes the service and the funeral in detail in her story:

We entered the hall, already crowded with mourners. Most were people unable to attend the funeral the following morning. Otoosan’s coffin now occupied the central position at the front of the hall, placed below a huge array of lilies, chrysanthemums, and orchids, all white, the traditional colour of death in Japan. (Nakanishi, 2010b, pp. 212-213)

On a happier note, Nakanishi often writes about her three boys. In her short story *My “Half” Family* she presents her close relationship with them and notes with bemusement the Japanese custom of referring to such children as „halves“ because they are biracial. The writer believes the relationship between her and her sons is different from that typical between Japanese mothers and their sons, and American mothers and theirs because of the language gap, with Nakanishi only superficially fluent in Japanese and her sons in English. This results in the necessity for a more physical communication:

My boys and I are playful; we make jokes. If actions speak louder than words, we know each other profoundly but at an intangible level. (Nakanishi, 2009a, p. 4)

In *The Lost Boys* the writer looks back at the times when her boys were small. Nakanishi has beautiful memories of taking care of them. It seems that she misses the time when her sons were vulnerable and playful, now that they are 20, 25 and 27:

I wish there were some device that could signal „significant“ moments. How satisfactory if I could have been serenaded by violins or by the plucking of the strings of a harp on the occasion I would last cradle each son in my arms, feed, bathe and dress him, tuck him into bed, sing him a lullaby, read him a story, take him for a walk, or for a ride on the back of my bike, make a Lego castle and bake cookies with him, go with him to a park to play, fly kites in the vacant lot next door; the millions of precious moments I’ve shared with each of my boys. (Nakanishi, 2012b)

She had no idea that life would pass so rapidly and that her boys would grow up and go away. In a recent interview, she described the new lives they are leading in these terms:

Taiki, who has just turned 27, is now working in Tokyo for an IT company. After graduating with a Degree in Philosophy from Shikoku Gakuin University, he studied English at Indiana University for a year and a half. Kei, 25, completed a Degree in Graphic Design and Illustration at Kurashiki College of Arts and Sciences over two years ago. He dreams of becoming a manga artist and, meanwhile, is making a living by working at Goshikidai Hospital as an Orderly. He is thinking of enrolling in a Nursing Degree. Maki, 20, who graduated from a Takamatsu High School in which he was enrolled in a special music course, will leave for Vienna in a few months to study Voice. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

When her sons were small, Nakanishi tried to take them abroad often, alternating visits to America and the UK. When she was forty-one she was granted a year’s sabbatical leave, spending that time in a small village called Halton in northern England where her two elder sons attended the local Primary School. Nakanishi feels that through such experiences, coupled with her being of a different culture, have imparted a sense of the larger world to her children and that they have imbibed western values they might not have encountered in a purely Asian environment. Her sons, like their mother, place a premium on privacy and independence and, perhaps most important, having been raised in such an insular society as Japan’s, can envisage a life outside Japan.

She hopes that they are „international citizens,“ familiar with not only the States and England, but also the other countries she has taken them to: Germany, Holland, France, and Taiwan. When people call her children „halves“, or when her boys refer to themselves by that term, Nakanishi is in the habit of saying, “Not half, but both” (Nakanishi, 2009a, p. 4).

Nakanishi feels she tried to teach her boys to see that a world exists outside Japan, but Japanese society is so homogeneous, so marked by ancient tradition, that many of its inhabitants know little of anywhere else:

[In Japan], if the mother is a foreigner, she tries, often in vain, to inculcate the traditions of her own country upon her children. I have made Western food for my sons, tried to speak English to them as much as possible, and raised them with foreign values. But from their earliest years, I could feel them slipping away, as they grew up immersed in a very different culture. (Nakanishi, 2012d)

However, not even insular Japan is exempt from the changes sweeping the modern world. In the story *From Fast Food to Fresh Fish*, for example, Nakanishi compares American and Japanese eating habits. While she values the old traditional healthy Japanese cuisine highly, she recognizes that American “junk” food has recently become popular with Japanese teenagers and young families. Modern Japan is:

No longer primarily a country, a land of sushi and it’s components, rice and raw fish. In recent years, it has become a prime purveyor of “junk” food. Every medium-sized town has its McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chickens, its Baskin Robbins and Pizza Huts. (Nakanishi, 2012b)

In her short stories Nakanishi often compares the values and customs characteristic of the various countries she has inhabited. She talks about different cultures and about the importance of knowing and accepting different ways of life. She is a shrewd observer and provides the reader with a vivid picture of her perceptions:

To me the most noticeable differences are found in the ideas of societies. Japan is very much an Asian country, in which the group takes precedence over the individual whereas, especially in England, the individual is regarded very highly, and eccentricity and idiosyncrasy are, if not always praised, at least tolerated. In Japan, private life is not as valued as in Britain and America. I’m interested, too in the ramifications of a country’s being “new” and



“old”. Britain and Japan are countries with very long historical traditions while the United States remains a relatively recent phenomenon as a Nation State. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

From the general she often descends to the personal. In one short story, she describes her family:

My mother was a vain, affectionate woman who happened to be physically rather clumsy and, in temperament, inclined to laziness and self-indulgence. In this respect, she was quite unlike her own mother, who was one of those individuals gifted at everything and anything: a reasonably skilled pianist, ... a sweet, unassuming woman who managed a large household with unobtrusive skill. (Nakanishi, 2012a, p. 175)

The author also believes that her father was very different from his own father. Her father got a Doctorate and became sufficiently wealthy to be able to have a „dream house“ constructed for him on Indiana’s largest lake, but he did not have the craftsman’s skills of her grandfather, employed throughout his life as a furniture maker. It is Takehito, the author’s husband, who resembles her paternal grandfather in being able to fix things at home:

Takehito can turn his hand to anything. He is a skilled carpenter who has built not only bookshelves, toy chests, tables and chairs in our home, but also a considerable portion of the house itself. ... (Nakanishi, 2012a, p. 177)

In the story entitled *From Indiana to Kagawa: From Tomatoes Ripe to Oranges Sweet and Glimpses* Nakanishi makes a humorous comparison between the American and the Japanese notion of a „farm“.

The country in the United States meant something quite different from the country in Japan. And when her new husband talked about their “farm”, she had to laugh. Her parents lived on a farm; acres upon acres of corn and soybeans stretching monotonously to the horizon, a barn housing livestock, a windmill and a farmhouse, while her new home consisted of a prefabricated building attached to the family house in a dusty courtyard enclosed by a concrete block wall. The orange groves were up the mountain; the carnation greenhouses, near the main road leading to an ugly, medium-sized city three kilometers away. (Nakanishi, 2003, p.9)

Nakanishi has acknowledged that *From Indiana to Kagawa: From Tomatoes Ripe to Oranges Sweet* is a kind of memorial to her beloved maternal grandfather, LaMont O’Harra. The story describes the happy times she spent as a child on his spacious farm, „The Maples,” in central Indiana. Similarly, in the story *A Stitch in Time*, Nakanishi professes to have had, as a girl, three cherished dreams: She wanted a horse, she wanted long hair and, finally, she wanted to marry someone like the man she called „Grandpa O’Harra“:

In retrospect, it occurs to me that one of my childhood dreams was directly related to my Grandpa. This, of course, was the dream of marrying a farmer. (Nakanishi, 2005a, p. 296)

Ironically, of her three girlish dreams, this was the one that came true, although a Japanese farmer is quite different from an American one. In this story, Nakanishi talks of her Japanese father-in-law, a thin, small, wiry individual, and of „Grandpa O’Harra“:

Sometimes I compare him to my grandfather, whom I think of as an American counterpart, but the discrepancies in physical appearance could scarcely be greater. My grandfather was a big man in every sense. ... He was a tall, commanding figure who carried his girth with dignity and authority. ... he was the most knowledgeable individual I have ever encountered. Like my grandmother, he was self-taught, ...he was especially interested in politics and history – especially the Civil War. (Nakanishi, 2005a, p. 295)

As a writer, Nakanishi wonders if she is sometimes too critical of life in Japan, which can be a country hard to accept for a foreigner because it represents such a different culture, one that, for a westerner, appears very conformist and exclusive in that any non-Japanese will never be wholly accepted. She hopes that any remarks in her stories that might appear negative or judgmental are more than counterbalanced by the great admiration and respect she feels for Japan. She believes her compulsion to write about Japan can be accounted for a temptation felt by nearly every „foreigner“ after prolonged residence in Japan: The desire to make sociological pronouncements about the Japanese, to „understand“ them, to analyze them and their society. Nakanishi also writes about the famous Oriental inscrutability, about the Japanese as people who are very polite but indirect because they do not want to offend or, even worse, risk open confrontation or the possibility of an argument:

I think it’s hard to know what they think. The idea of the mask is very popular here. I think a big

theme of Japanese life is that, depending on circumstance, you adopt the mask appropriate for your age and sex and social conditions, and the person you really are is underneath somewhere, hidden away. Social interactions are based on the presumption that you know what you are supposed to do and what people expect of you and that you are willing to play along accordingly. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

The writer believes the Japanese do not want to engage in a frank exchange of views because the emphasis is always on a smoothly functioning society, on social harmony. This harmony would be disrupted were people actually say to what they thought or do as they wanted. Some Japanese love to be with foreigners almost as a form of release or comic relief. In the company of such „outsiders“, the rules the Japanese labor under each day are suddenly inapplicable:

I often think that the Japanese love to be with foreigners because it's a great struggle for them to keep up this pretense all the time. They know that with foreigners they can relax and speak freely. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

On the one hand, Nakanishi is fascinated by Japanese traditions and culture, particularly by the rituals associated with the celebration of „O-Bon“ which (in August), after New Year's Day, represents Japan's most important Festival. It is the Japanese equivalent of Mexico's „Day of the Dead“. Nakanishi admits she often finds herself close to tears when she participates in the Buddhist customs intended to honor the spirits of one's ancestors: The lighting of candles, incense and lanterns at the graves, the placing of flowers, the washing of the memorial stones. On the other, Nakanishi believes the Japanese are subjected to almost unbearable stresses and frustrations in their daily lives:

In their self-discipline and concern to maintain social harmony, the Japanese are wholly admirable. But they pay such a terrible price, one which they acknowledge when, for example, my students admit that they feel „freer“ when they speak English in our classes, or for those rare, darling souls willing to risk venturing abroad alone – not on a package holiday with other Japanese – who confess to feeling that a great burden has been lifted from their shoulders once they've left their own country. (Nakanishi, 2002, pp. 2-3)

Nakanishi esteems the Japanese for their self-discipline, dignity, politeness, courage, and capacity for hard work. She thinks the Japanese are a very tough race, physically and psychically, and that this toughness is a matter of necessity; they need to triumph over daily adversity as residents of an overcrowded, tiny nation with few natural resources, living in a place prone to such disasters as typhoons and earthquakes:

What is amazing about the Japanese is that they have had to endure the harshest of conditions but have evolved an exquisite politeness in their day-to-day interactions. Every foreigner who comes here remarks on that. However, the toughness is there. Great bravery is expected, as I learned when I had my three sons here. There was no question of an epidural being administered; no pain relief is provided at all, and Japanese women are supposed to endure childbirth in silence, without crying out in pain. It is an odd paradox: On the one hand, the wonderful gentleness and courtesy, on the other, the admonition to *gamanshinasai* – to endure any physical pain without complaint. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

Nakanishi believes the Japanese have a very different sense of humor from her own. She thinks hers owes a great deal to the sly wit of the English, but she has found that the Japanese can find anything approaching sarcasm, however affectionately expressed, hurtful and incomprehensible. She admits that she now adopts an approach of trying always to be sincere and emotionally supportive with her Japanese friends. Nevertheless, she thinks it a pity, in a sense, as these friends cannot, she believes, know or respond to her „truest“ self, which delights in teasing and irony. However, this was also true, she found, in America, where words intended to be interpreted as jokes were taken in all seriousness. In this regard, Nakanishi feels most at home in Britain, where people seem to speak the form of English she speaks herself.

For Nakanishi, the notion of privacy is valuable despite her often taking herself and her family as the topic of her stories. In one of her earliest short stories, she explains about the resentment she once experienced when she had only recently arrived in Japan. On a ferry to Honshu Island, Nakanishi found she had attracted the attention of three Junior High School girls who wanted to communicate with her because she was a foreigner. Nakanishi made hurried apologies, escaped to an upper deck, and spent the rest of the journey there, hiding from her „admirers,“ while reflecting ruefully on the rudeness of her own behavior:

I don't feel proud of myself," I admitted. "I'm sure those girls were nice, whatever that means. I just can't bear being considered public property, having complete strangers feeling entitled to come up and monopolize my time simply because I'm not Japanese." (Nakanishi, 2007, p. 16)

When she gave birth to her first child and recuperated at her mother-in-law's home, she was surprised and sometimes disturbed by the fact that visitors, such as the local priest, the newspaper delivery boy, neighbors and relatives, entered the house without even knocking. However, this was a kind of initiation to the life that was to follow:

Then, as a mother with small children in a separate household, I learned that I needed to keep my own front door unlocked as it was considered a kind of rudeness if people could not enter my home freely. ... (Nakanishi, 2012c, p. 176)

The writer values eccentricity and idiosyncrasy but thinks that, like privacy, they are accorded little value in Japan. She feels blessed to inhabit Japan, however, and especially her rural area, where she can bask in the natural beauty that surrounds her:

I love Japan, but I would hate to be a Japanese. I like the structured nature of society here and the security it offers my family, but I dread our falling prey to its emphasis on conformity. In a place that can physically resemble a paradise, I am reminded of Sartre's notion that hell is other people. Here, one is constantly watched and judged, but it is possible sometimes to escape those prying eyes, to find peace in the great natural beauty by which we are surrounded. (Nakanishi, 2001a, p. 38)

Nakanishi has conflicted feelings about her homeland. Although she loves her family and friends resident in America, in the story *Peace Beyond National Boundaries*, we find the writer trying to analyze the United States and ways in which it inspires both nostalgia and fear, affection and dislike:

I find my native land, America, an insoluble paradox. The United States is not only the world's wealthiest nation and its single surviving „superpower" but, of all the countries of the world, it also has the most diverse population, its citizens drawn from every nation on earth. It is a place where a great variety of cultural customs are observed, a huge number of languages are spoken, ...

America is also a country which can be vengeful and angry, as witnessed by the general reaction of its citizens following the events of September eleventh of last year. (Nakanishi, 2002/2003, p. 1)

Nevertheless, Nakanishi has fond memories of her childhood and her hometown, emotions revived with surprising force she finds whenever she revisits Rolling Prairie, Indiana. On such occasions, she recalls how each tree in her yard and in her neighborhood represented a childhood friend for a little girl fond of lying under trees or of climbing them. Her parents' separation had had a devastating effect on a child who had once been sunny and sociable. It was a time when she experienced a personality shift:

I felt increasingly alienated from my siblings, parents and from the wider world, retreating into a world of books. Only they, and nature, were reliable; only literature, plants and trees could be loved without fear or confusion. (Nakanishi, 2006, p. 55)

Now, after so many years' absence, a trip to Rolling engenders pity as well as nostalgia. Nakanishi describes these emotions in the story entitled *Home Thoughts*:

I felt a familiar ambiguity of emotions: depression jostled with curiosity steeled me and I glanced up. The old house looked worse each time I revisited it. (Nakanishi, 2006, p. 53)

In this tale, Nakanishi recounts how she feels she has become a foreigner in her own country. Her accent has changed after long years abroad and now, when she visits the States, she finds she is rarely taken to be an American; she has been asked if she were from Germany or Australia, from Canada or England. She occasionally feels the awkwardness and discomfort of a visitor in a strange land when she returns to America. But she harbors a philosophy about „home“:

Home is where the heart is. If we can learn to find happiness and respect, we need never consider ourselves „strangers," wherever we may be. My relatives live in America but most of my closest friends are in Britain and Japan. (Nakanishi, Fall 2006, pp. 58-59)

Nakanishi has come to realize that, in being with the family she loves, the place where she and her and her family were meant to be is Japan or, as she remarks in a new story, "I am in the place where I belong," (Nakanishi, 2012c, p. 55). A beloved grandmother had given her a copy of an illustrated book of Japanese fairy tales when

she was a child. Although she is not superstitious, Nakanishi wonders if it was an omen, if it somehow was destined she would start a new life half a world away from her roots.

### Wendy Jones Nakanishi's Contribution to World Literature

With her numerous academic publications, research projects, and short, semi-autobiographical stories about her personal experiences in Indiana, England, France and Japan, Nakanishi has made a contribution not only to world literature, but to the present-day interest in multiculturalism. Her vivid descriptions, narrative style, feeling for language and sense of humor particularly in evidence in her „creative non-fiction“ pieces, mean that Nakanishi is able to capture, on paper, the paradoxes of modern life, with its rootless citizens who travel the globe, charmed and perplexed by the unfamiliar customs they encounter on their journeys.

Her insights into Japanese life are of particular value, as she is one of a small band of non-native authors who stay long-term in Japan and enter fully into the life of the nation. Nakanishi has lived in Japan for more than thirty years, and her non-academic work has the ring of an authenticity derived from writing based on personal experience.

Nakanishi is especially keen to try to „translate“ her life in Japan into stories, to make it accessible to others and, especially, to compatriots who have never ventured beyond America's borders because she thinks that:

Unless you live in Japan, it's impossible to realize how different everything is, the expectations, and assumptions. Superficially, the country looks Western, but so many things are different, so even though tourists may come here, I think they can't understand typical Japanese life at all. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

Nakanishi is a narrator capable of producing short stories that often strike an emotional chord with their readers whether she is writing of her joys and worries as a teacher, wife, mother or daughter. She is a devoted parent to her three sons, placing the demands of her family life before those of her working and writing careers. One of her professed dreams is "to see her boys grown up, to see them getting married and to dance at their weddings" (*Interview with W. J. Nakanishi*, 2007). If her writings cannot be considered „great“ literature, they are valuable in evoking vividly the sense of a certain place and time and the feelings that adhered to them.

Yet there is a tangible sadness lingering in much of

Nakanishi's work. Her short stories about her personal life express, for example, her deep feelings for her family in Japan, while acknowledging and ruling the barriers that separate her from her nearest and dearest. Her composition of such tales might be construed as a kind of „love letter“ to her boys, but one they may never read as she writes in English, a language that her children were, until recent years, largely unable to understand.

Her work also reflects the frustration of a long-term resident of Japan who is condemned always to being an outsider both because of an inadequate command of the language and because of her physical appearance. Fair-skinned, blue-eyed and brown haired, she is always instantly recognizable as a „foreigner“ and condemned to the position of an observer who can never integrate fully into Japanese society.

Nakanishi is not an author who believes that life is „easy“ or even that it should be. If there is a „message“ or „moral“ in Nakanishi's writing, it might be expressed in the adages of popular culture. Like David Bowie, she would counsel us to „turn and face the strange“ or if „life offers lemons, make lemonade“. Nakanishi absorbed from her neglectful parents the helpful lesson of the benefits that can be garnered from negative example. Similarly, although she might wish to have made Britain rather than Japan her home, she has been able to make the most of her new exotic homeland and to find happiness and fulfillment there.

Although Nakanishi harbors doubts about the desirability of the unfettered movement of people and goods about the earth, the writer believes that, given current trends of globalization, with the world „shrinking“ in effect, a greater need than ever for people to understand, respect and tolerate different cultures should exist. She has come to the conclusion that any encounter with the „other“ leads to greater self-awareness. Nakanishi's non-fiction „creative“ writing is most valuable as a contribution to modern-day multiculturalism. In this respect, her work contributes to the creation of a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations and cultures.

But this is not enough to satisfy Nakanishi. She would like to write more and to produce work that is not so heavily autobiographical, as she remarked in an interview years ago:

One thing, I wish I were a different kind of writer. This is something Agatha Christie also said. She knew that she could write a certain kind of story, that she was the undisputed master of the detective novel, the „Crime Queen,“ but that it would be bliss if she were able to pen something quite different. My fate seems to be to write recollections of my past. I wish I were a writer who could write about other things. I'm hoping in the future to write about other places, people, and perhaps use more imagination in my stories

rather than recording something based on my own experience. (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication)

In recent years, she has succeeded in fulfilling this wish. Wendy Jones Nakanishi has written a novel entitled *Imperfect Strangers* that was issued in digital form courtesy of the UK's leading publisher of e-books, Endeavour Press, and in print version, as a paperback, by Fine Line Press in New Zealand. Both versions appeared in September, 2015 and are available on Amazon.

Published under the pen name of 'Lea O'Harra,' Nakanishi's *Imperfect Strangers* is an exciting detective story set on the imaginary campus of Fujikawa, a small private university in western Japan. Its main character, Kenji Inoue, Chief Inspector of the local police station, investigates the death of the university's President, Professor Nomura, found with his throat slit in his office. In interviewing six possible suspects, Inoue uncovers a web of intrigue, secrets and corruption. The novel represents as much an analyze of the dark underbelly of Japanese society as a satisfying 'who-dunnit'. (Nakanishi, 2015a,b)

Nakanishi has followed up that initial foray into crime fiction, with a second book in the so-called „Inspector Inoue murder mystery series“. This book, published by Endeavour Press in Kindle and paperback version in June, 2016 and also available on Amazon, is entitled *Progeny*. Based on an actual event, it describes the disappearance of a small girl at a shopping mall; when her body is eventually discovered, the missing person's inquiry becomes a murder investigation. Like *Imperfect Strangers*, *Progeny* is especially valuable for offering an outsider's perspective on Japan (Nakanishi, Shikoku Gakuin University in Kagawa, Japan, personal communication). Reviewing *Progeny* on Amazon, Elaine Tomasso observes that while the plot is average, “she loves the way MsO'Harra integrates a wealth of information on Japanese culture into it seamlessly to provide a novel worth reading” (Tomasso, 2016).

It may be that Nakanishi's venture into murder mystery signals a complete change of direction for her as a writer. Perhaps she will abandon memoir in favor of fiction. In any case, whatever form her work as an author takes in the future, it is a given that it will represent literature that has value as a bridge between cultures.

## CONCLUSION

Emigrant literature can play an important role in our „global“ society and we are required to learn about and exhibit tolerance towards different cultures. The literature of expatriate writers is a valuable testament to the human

ability to accept and even to embrace change and difference and, as such, it helps us in this process of understanding and accepting different cultures. The literature also amuses, entertains, instructs and enlightens. Wendy Jones Nakanishi, in her works, offers a vivid depiction of her experience of life in a culture foreign to that in which she was raised. As Nakanishi observes, although Japan is superficially westernized, it remains, at heart, an essentially alien culture, whose customs and beliefs defy western expectations and assumptions. It is important that Nakanishi's voices are heard, to explain „east“ to „west“.

I embarked on this research project about Nakanishi's work mindful of its importance for our multicultural world and I would also like to bring her writings to a wider audience.

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