

The ‘uncanny’ in Fukushima’s nuclear aftermath: anxiety-provoking attachment to home

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“I’m afraid to say it, but we love Chernobyl. It’s become the meaning of our lives. The meaning of our suffering” (Alexievich 1997, 215), says Natalya Roslova. She is one of the voices in Svetlana Alexievich’s [Voices from Chernobyl](#). Her monologue continues:

On the way back, the sun is setting, I say, “Look at how beautiful this land is!” The sun is illuminating the forest and the fields, bidding us farewell. “Yes,” one of the Germans who speaks Russian answers, “it’s pretty, but it’s contaminated.” He has a dosimeter in his hand. And then I understand that the sunset is only for me. This is my land. I’m the one who lives here. (Alexievich 1997, 216)

The monologue reveals her strange affection to Chernobyl which awakens what Freud called [the uncanny](#). In short, the Freudian uncanny is what evokes not only fear and dread but also affection – it is the ambivalence of fear and affection (Freud 1919, 123). And this ambivalence is something that Chernobyl shares with Fukushima.

In this piece, I will shed light on the strange affection of the uncanny. Particularly, I would like to present a story of Momoko who I met during my fieldwork in Fukushima in 2014. Although she was an ordinary 30-something woman in Fukushima, extraordinary was that she forfeited marriage with her fiancé to stay in Fukushima after the nuclear accident. Her story reveals not only her strong attachment to her hometown and willingness to stay there but also her fear of radiation and anxiety about health risks. It is a manifestation of the same kind of strange affection which belongs to the realms of the Freudian uncanny.

Ever since Momoko was born, she has always lived in her hometown located in the western part of Fukushima. There are always people who never leave their hometowns and continue to live with their family, and Momoko is one of them. On the contrary, her ex-fiancé is not from Fukushima – his family moved to Momoko’s town when he was a child due to work circumstances. He spent some years in Fukushima, but he left for good to go to a university in Tokyo. Despite the distance, she was happy in the relationship with him for a few years before the accident. Sometimes a rural life felt inconvenient to her, but she could go to Tokyo on some weekends and even travel

abroad at least once a year. She said she was not always happy about her rural life, but she was not unhappy about it either. It was perhaps a simple pastoral life, but it was about to change on 11 March 2011.

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The nuclear accident was a life-threatening experience for Momoko, not to mention the preceding severe earthquake and continuous aftershocks. “I thought I could die by radiation! I guess I was oversentimental and naïve at that time,” she said with a laugh. She confessed that she was feeling her own death for the first time in her life after she saw the multiple explosions at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on television and when everyone started talking about radiation. But after this initial oversentimental phase, she quickly learned radiation protection through study meetings on radiation and its health effects organized by the local government and online research. When I met her in 2014, she showed great familiarity with the terminologies such as different names of radioisotopes, units of radioactivity and radiation dosage, and with the particular situation of radiation contamination in her living environment. This very much resembles how people affected by the Chernobyl accident became heavily informed by bio-scientific knowledge – what [Adriana Petryna](#) (2002) described a biomedical subject.

In the meantime, the initial oversentimental phase never ended for her ex-fiancé. He was eager for her to evacuate not only from Fukushima but also from East Japan with his family. Although she knew she would leave her hometown to live with him once she gets married (and she was actually looking forward to the day to come), she could not leave her family and friends who were stuck in the middle of the nuclear crisis. She felt she was a part of them, and more importantly, she felt there was a growing affection for her hometown. Despite knowing the risks she was taking, she wanted to stay for one simple reason – because it was her home. So they were destined for a never-solving dispute about whether or not she should evacuate. She confessed that she had been yelled at and called “foolishly stubborn” by him over the phone. Even though she was trying to understand how much he cared about her, their relationship was falling apart. “After all,” she said, “he didn’t have a ‘home’ like I did. He would have never understood how I felt about my hometown.” A few months after the accident, she was single again.

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Momoko expressed her strong affection for her hometown and self-determination to live there which eventually set her apart from her ex-fiancé, but it does not mean that she was not concerned about possible risks. Also, even though she formed her opinions of risk perception and decided to stay on her own terms, such decision making could be an art of balancing the fear with the available knowledge. Moreover, there are displays of real-time spatial radiation dose, everyday monitoring of locally-produced food, examination of human bodies and on-going decontamination works throughout the prefecture. They are all constant reminders of the presence of radiation in everyday life. In such situation, it seemed as if she was in a constant struggle with her fear. She mentioned that her willingness to learn radiation protection could be her fear of radiation just reversed. To use her own word, “I know the spatial dose is a lot lower now and radiation contamination is no longer detected in the food we eat, but it still weighs on my mind. And that’s probably why I keep checking the dose and screening results.”

Thus, Momoko’s affection for her hometown becomes extremely ambivalent which comprises her fear of radiation. In this way, it coincides with the Freudian sense of uncanny. Freud defines the particular state of feeling uncanny as “the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 1919, 123). In other words, the uncanny is something familiar that has long been repressed, and the uncanny effect arises when the repressed returns (Freud 1919, 150). To an extent, Freud’s intention here was to transgress conventional reality by this de-familiarization of the familiar. It is notable that what is de-familiarized overlaps with the excess of reality in Bataille’s sense. But for Freud, such excess could be associated with the attraction of death (1919,148). In fact, Freud (1919, 148) did not forget to mention that the uncanny could be represented by anything associated with death.

It should be noted that for many Japanese people, the word radiation is arguably the signifier of death because of its association with their collective memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although it was five years ago Momoko closely felt her own, radiation is still present in the everyday life in Fukushima today. In this sense, her life in Fukushima remains as something that brings her own death to her consciousness and her affection for her hometown becomes the uncanny.

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I keep in touch with Momoko by email. In this April, she sent me pictures of cherry blossoms – *sakura* in Japanese – in full bloom. People eat and drink under fully bloomed *sakura* throughout Japan every spring, and it is called *hanami*. It looked like she had it for this year. “I think the *sakura* in my town is the best after all”, she said.



Cherry Blossoms [*Sakura*] photographed by Mokomo near where she lives in Western Fukushima Prefecture, Japan. ‘I think the sakura in my home town is the best after all’ says Mokomo. The image of people having *hanami* in Fukushima could be simply horrific because of radiation contamination. But for her, such image is also a landscape of her home that she loves in spite of the contamination. It is uncanny, but perhaps, it is also a manifestation of her self-determination to live with radiation.

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