

Nanako Kojima
Japanese and Japanese American Women Writers
Professor Miyake
May 13, 2016

Critique on Home In A Foreign Country

Home In A Foreign Country is a collection of different stories of a Japanese college student's experiences as an exchange student at Pomona College, Claremont. The writer divides her chapters by using different spots in Pomona College campus and tells stories that took place or are related to each place. For example, the chapters include her room, in which she talks about her struggles with the language, and the Little Bridges, which is related to her experiences of playing the saxophone with the Pomona College band. There seems to be no big, consistent theme throughout the story, but it is a vividly described, honestly-told proof that she lived a part of her life at Pomona College.

The most noticeable characteristic of her writing in this collection is that the writer code-switches between Japanese, her mother tongue, and English. She uses English in the chapters in which she talks about her struggle with English, her boyfriend, college band, and her favorite place in Pomona campus. On the other hand, she tells stories of her shocking experience related to her bangs and of her first day of class in Japanese. It seems that she uses the two different languages depending on what she wants to tell in each episode. In other words, her choice of the language is also a part of the story. The fact that she chose to write about her struggles with English and her boyfriend surprises me. These seem to be complex topics that it would have been easier for her to write in her first language. However, I can see that there is a strong will behind her decision; it is her challenge to herself to express as much as possible using the language that she struggles with throughout her exchange life. Also, we could interpret her choice of the language as her way of describing how she was seeing the world when each story actually took place. For instance, she tells us about her honest experience of her first day of her literature class in Japanese. By using her first

language for the majority of the story, she highlights the separation of her mind and the English conversations going on around her in the class room.

Furthermore, I can see that when the author is writing in Japanese, she is confident in how she sounds like, and has a consistent style of writing, which is spontaneous and sometimes comical. I also can see that the writer is definitely more comfortable when writing in Japanese than in English. However, for this reason, she can be a little too erratic and talkative in the chapters written in Japanese. Of course, this work is “somewhere between a very short autobiography and a diary”, as she describes in the introduction, and thus she is free to digress as much as she wants. However, her side stories can be sometimes too noisy, and therefore weaken the main point of the story. On the other hand, since she is more careful when writing in English, though not as smooth and natural as writings of native speakers of English, her sentences sound more polished than the sentences written in Japanese. I can see that she chooses her words more deliberately in the English chapters, and it creates a calmer atmosphere in them. In the first chapter, Walker #621, she talks about her thoughts about the strong connection between language and emotions, and the absence of the connection bothers her when she is speaking in English. She asks whether the separation means that she is not “the real her” in English. Perhaps, the impression that the reader gets from the change in her writing style in the two languages might be the answer to this question. In Japanese, she definitely has what we can call her style, but it is hard to see in the chapters written in English. In other words, she is aware of how she sounds like and how she looks like to the audience in Japanese, but she cannot know this in English; while she can create herself with words in Japanese, she is still no one with her limited English.

The reader would also find the author’s skill of observing little, everyday things and developing her thoughts from them interesting and fascinating. For instance, in the chapter ‘Edmunds Ball Room’, she talks about her realization of how self-consciousness, triggered by a comment her friend made on her bangs. The way she develops her observation on language is also

interesting. She starts realizing that there is separation of her emotions and her words because of the fact that she can talk about her sad history without any pain when speaking English. She really does have a unique scope through which she observes her life.

Over all, this work is successful in telling the author's honest experiences as an exchange student. Of course, the chapters written in English are not very well-written due to her English skills. However, it also tells what the "English her" is like at this very moment. This might sound a little too harsh, but her English writing means "the limits of her world" as she writes in the first chapter. And it is totally fine. The author writes that this work is something between a short biography and a diary in the introduction. I believe that this is also a great growth record of the English her, and I look forward to seeing how she is going to expand the limits of her English world.