Human, this ever-changing creature. *Oshiko's Default Standard* by Yukiko Motoya

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Abstract

As seen in the classical SF *anime* film *Galaxy Express 999* (1979), relations between human and AI-enhanced transhumans and an AI-controlled dystopian society have always been popular in the Japanese imagination. These relations can be confrontational, or alternatively, affectionate, but often suggest the invaluableness of transitory human essence over the immortality of machines. The novel *Oshiko's Default Standard* (*Oshiko no deforuto*) (2021) by Yukiko Motoya (b. 1979), however, casts doubt upon this possible self-complacency of humans. Set in post-crisis Japan, the novel focuses on an everyday-life sphere – child-rearing and nursery school – in a society in which co-prosperity with the AI is the main national policy. Nursery schools aim to raise children as homogenous as possible, as individuality is now considered vulnerability rather than strength. Most professions have been taken over by white cube-shaped robots, and people – especially children and youths – start idealising and imitating them through implanting devices in all body parts. Oshiko, the protagonist, is a mother of two and has adapted well to this society, in which everyone is connected to the internet for 24hours/day and endlessly consumes digitised content. Through close reading, the present paper analyses some of the issues the novel depicts, focusing on the possible changes AI-dominated society makes on humans. The paper also analyses the novel's defamiliarisation techniques through peculiar use of language, which makes it difficult for this technological dystopia to be translated into other languages.

Keywords: Yukiko Motoya, *Oshiko no deforuto*, technological dystopia, Japanese dystopian novel, transhuman

In *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Claeys (2017, The Post-Totalitarian Dystopia section) argues that the "concern with machines and their increasing domination of humanity" is one of the most important themes in dystopian literature after 1950. Although the book focuses on British and American works, the relationship between *naturalia* and *artificialia*

can be found in the Japanese imagination as well. Indeed, Napier (1996, p.2) points out that "the increasing oppressiveness of technology" was found in Japanese fantastic literature already in Meiji period (1868-1912). To date, narratives contrasting dehumanising technology and the invaluableness of human essence are abundant both in literature and popular culture; for example, the central theme of a mega-hit SF *anime* film *Galaxy Train 999* (1979) is a confrontation between immortal "mechanized people" and mortal humans. Although economically poor humans often long for the opportunity to obtain mechanized bodies, the story emphasizes the invaluableness of human essences such as emotions and mortality. This appreciation of the human essence over machines can also be found in the domain of *shojo manga*, or girls' comics. In *Tenshi tachi no shinkaron* ("The Theory of Angels' Evolution") (1990), the main characters are humanoid cyborgs with hugely enhanced bodily and intellectual abilities (and all with an exceptionally beautiful appearance), but the humanoid Elena experiences an identity crisis as he feels he is just mimicking humans – who continuously evolve and reproduce – whereas he just stays the same for hundreds of years. Just like in *Galaxy Train 999*, this transitory nature – which eventually leads to death – is considered the human essence and consequently is placed over the efficiency and eternity represented by machines. If we turn to literature, AI has the central role in the survival of the human race in a post-apocalyptic novel *Under the Eye of the Big Bird* (Kawakami, 2016), and here too, the omnipotent AI confesses that its sense of belonging, or *raison d'etre,* is actually found in co-existence with humans who have a sense of individuality.

Thus, it might be said that the above-mentioned binary opposition of humans and machines often finds a point of compromise, eulogising what humans do have – emotions, the beauty of transitory and mortal life, etc. Such a view might also be connected to the "critical or open-ended dystopias" with "a utopian core at their centre" (Baccolini 2012, p.40). However, the novel *Oshiko no deforuto* ("Oshiko's Default Standard", hereafter referred to as *Oshiko*) by Yukiko Motoya (2021a) casts doubt upon this possible self-complacency in humans regarding the relationship between *naturalia* and *artificialia*. The novel's protagonist lives comfortably in a future Japan, whose society is completely digitalized. The novel suggests that the human essence is indeed its transitory and adaptive nature, which makes it possible to become so close to machines if necessary.

The present paper focuses on some elements of the AI/humanity rela-

tionship and the transhuman features presented in *Oshiko*, and explores how the idea of human essence in binary opposition to the machine can be used satirically. The paper also analyses some of the techniques of defamiliarization used in the novel.

Oshiko's Default Standard (2021) by Yukiko Motoya

The theme of transformation in humans and their relationship with AI is found in various forms in recent Japanese dystopian novels, such as *Dwindling World* (Murata, 2015) or *Under the Eye of the Big Bird* (Kawakami, 2016). The renowned literary critic Minako Saitō called the decade starting from 2010 "a decade of dystopian novels in Japanese literature" (Saitō, 2019, p. 72), and *Oshiko* can probably be placed within this current.

Oshiko no deforuto or *Oshiko's Default Standard* was written by Yukiko Motoya (b. 1979). Being active as a playwright, novelist, director and actor, Motoya has won several literary prizes in Japan, including the prestigious Akutagawa prize. Although some of her works have been translated into other languages, *Oshiko* has not been translated, and one possible reason for this will be discussed in a later section.

The story takes place in a Japan of the future. The earlier occurrence of some major disaster or "unrest" (8)[1] after which the world changed completely is indicated, although it is never explained exactly what happened. A (fictitious) World Children's Health Organization issues guidelines for the healthy growth of children, where it is recommended to "let children stay inside the building when possible" and to "create an environment in which children can spend as long as possible with digital apparatus" (8). Enhancing bodily functions and senses by implanting small devices (for example, operating on retinas to display videos played on a digital device) is very popular. Most professions – such as shop assistant, waiter, bureaucrat, taxi and bus driver, as well as medical doctor (but not teacher) – are taken over by a white cube-shaped machine called *EEAI* (a

[1] All texts cited from the novel and other texts written in Japanese have been translated into English by the author of the present paper. When the original text used is an e-book without a page number, the location is shown in % (e.g. "8" means where 8% of the total text is read).

word play on AI meaning "good love" in Japanese), which was developed by a multinational technology company that has now monopolised this market. The whole setting fits well with the analysis by K nosu (2022, p. 31) on dystopian literature and SF, where she argues that in more recent dystopian novels, SF elements are often not foregrounded, although the existence of advanced technology such as clones and AI is postulated for the everyday life of characters. The lack of detailed explanation about the authority which controls the changed society is also pointed out in the same study, and this is also applicable to *Oshiko*.

The main character Oshiko is a young mother of two daughters, of which the younger one is in an elite nursery (nursery education has been made virtually obligatory by the state). Oshiko seems to have completely adapted to this new society, which tries to bring up its children as homogeneously as possible, because "differences are the origin of all types of unhappiness" (14). She chooses to go through all sorts of treatments to make life easier and more convenient: implanting chips on the tip of the tongue to reproduce tastes (to help weight control), or micro earphones implanted to play video and music, etc. She constantly consumes multiple content, for example by viewing several videos concurrently while also searching for information using a digital device, and feels insecure if the information does not keep on flooding into her system.

The antagonist in the novel is Kopi-mama, the mother of another child (Kopi) in the same nursery. Kopi-mama struggles in isolation, despising the digitalized society and its educational system – whilst other mothers secretly call her "Homo Erectus" for her anachronistic lifestyle. Oshiko, however, appreciates Kopi-mama's struggles and sufferings as they appear to be wonderfully "raw" content and tries to befriend her to observe and consume it. As Kopi-mama is looking for an alternative and more humane education for her son, they go together to an open day of a private "Offline School" established by a charismatic founder, which provides non-digitalized education where children even play in nature and are encouraged to develop individuality and resist homogeneity. However, the founder's speech at the open day sounds totally unrealistic in the digitalized society. In despair, Kopi-mama decides to implant chips into herself and her son, to enable him and her to adapt to society. Oshiko, for the first time in a long time, has some doubts about the system she lives in. After the implantation of the device however, Kopi-mama tells Oshiko that she had finally understood what the essence of a human being really

is.

The novel ends with the scene of the nursery graduation ceremony, where children all play music on stage "perfectly, as if it has been recorded beforehand" (51). Kopi-mama, who erstwhile seemed to have adapted well to the implant, suddenly climbs on stage in panic, screaming, as she cannot recognize her own son amongst all the similar-looking children. At the same time, Oshiko herself experiences an intense reconfiguration of the senses – her vision becomes TV fuzz, and then all the other parents around her and the nursery children turn into smooth and shiny cubical objects. She panics at first but then starts to feel a strong love for these cubes – she realises that her "function" as a human has been upgraded, and decides to implant even more devices in her body.

Technological Society and Human Essence

As the summary in the previous section indicates, the changing human within a technological society is depicted in various ways in *Oshiko*, leading to the question of what it means to be a human at all. And while technology and dehumanisation are a common theme in dystopian novels, *Oshiko* presents it in a highly satirical fashion.

Parents' Generation – Improving the Human Condition?

Bostrom (2003, p. 4) describes transhumanism as "…improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities". In the novel, Oshiko's generation is described as "the last generation that grew up while being told that the overuse of smartphone and internet would have negative effects (9)". Thus they retain the memory of the old values when it was considered ideal for children to play outside, and the overuse of digital devices was considered dangerous. However, it is explained that "the world radically changed after that unrest, and all the standards were renewed. What had been believed to be important till then lost their values, and there were phenomena of worshipping what had been considered crazy" (8). As mentioned already, details of the "unrest" are never given in the novel, but one way to interpret this may be the fading memory of

the parents' generation – it is explained that Oshiko cannot remember the past very vividly, and that this is a common phenomenon: "…it seems that due to the great increase of time spent using digital devices, the memory is now constantly rewritten" (11). This collectively fading and rewritten memory is reminiscent of "the management of amnesia", or controlling of a group's narrative, which has been a concern of dystopias "from the very beginning" (Serrano-Muñoz, 2021, pp. 1350-1351). The society encourages people to be constantly connected to the internet and using digital devices, and most people do not hesitate to improve "the human condition" by implanting devices all over their bodies. However, it is not clearly explained exactly who promotes this obscurantism – which, again, might indicate that Oshiko and the others do not really care about it, as an effect of the same obscurantism. The transformation is not only physical but mental as well, as they become addicted to constantly consuming recommended content and thus lose the ability to actively read books or live without being connected to internet (22). Such deep dependency, or the internet turning into an almost bodily function, seems to be one of the frequent themes in contemporary Japanese literature (Takahashi & Saitō, 2025, 82). In *Oshiko*'s case, however, these physical and psychological changes might not necessarily be such a smooth transition to becoming transhuman, as indicated by Kopi-mama's mental breakdown.

Children's Generation – Creatures of a Different Version

If the protagonist's generation needs to adapt to the new reality, their children, who are born after the societal change, "are given more content than breast milk and can use digital apparatus before they reach one year" (15) and are "creatures of a different version in all senses" (15). Oshiko has difficulty even understanding her daughters' language as they speak very fast – their information processing speed is incredibly high, having been exposed to digital content continuously since birth. Their eyes and heads are bigger than those of their parents, reminding Oshiko of some extraterrestrial creatures. These depictions of bodily changes experienced by both generations seem to follow the pattern of Japanese dystopian novels, where the human body is often a main theme (Specchio, 2023).

And although the details of the "unrest" (8) which caused the societal change are not explained, the sense of despair about the future and need for survival are present in the novel, and are thus used as reasons for

bringing up children to be homogenous and immersed in the internet. As the future is unpredictable and there might come a day when children must always stay inside, it is important that they have the ability not to suffer when being constantly connected only to virtual reality. It is also important for them to be homogenous, that is not to have preferences or differences, so that they can survive in any environment. Children who prefer to play offline are advised to visit a hospital for the treatment of "Offline Addiction" – an addiction to the environment without internet.

Much of the above can be read as a satire of the reality (e.g. internet addiction), but the description of those children's psychological features suggests how it might be if humans do become closer to AI. The elder daughter of Oshiko uses the male first-person pronoun in plural, *orera*, referring to herself. It is not because she resists her given sex, but because she does not distinguish between boys and girls, nor self and other. The idea of the disappearing (or complete lack of) border between the self and others has been explored in relation to AI, for example in the novel *Under the Eye of the Big Bird* (2016) mentioned earlier. There, AI "mothers", which exist as separate entities all over the world looking after humans, are all connected to each other – one is all, and all is one. In *Oshiko*, because of educating children to become as homogenous as possible (like separate physical copies of a prototype) humans might develop a collective, rather than individual, sense of self altogether.

Is There AI (or EEAI) – Human Relationship?

As cited in the Introduction, Claeys (2017) argues that "concern with machines and their increasing domination of humanity" is one of the most important trends observed in today's dystopian imagination. The word "domination" suggests that there is the subject to dominate and the object to be dominated – and there exists a relationship between the two. Indeed, in the works of popular culture and literature mentioned earlier, "machine" or AI characters express their (possibly programmed) thoughts – if not emotions – so that contact of some sort can be expected with other entities, such as humans.

In *Oshiko*, however, it is only humans who try to mimic AI. As mentioned in the summary, in the novel's world most of the professions are taken over by white cube-shaped machines developed by a multinational

technology company. As a part of government policies to make AI's image more friendly, "the media suddenly started using this grotesque term *EEAI* 10 years ago…at the beginning, it only felt wrong, but the media kept using it regardless and gradually it took root" (12). As already mentioned, *EEAI* means "good love" in Japanese. Children grow up seeing these *EEAI* working all around them and thus get attached to them – little children would dream of becoming cubic devices when they grow up; teens go through plastic surgeries to erase their humanness and become closer to *EEAI* by eliminating pores or making the skeletal frame squarer. So rather than cyborgs mimicking humans like Elena in *The Angels' Theory of Evolution,* it is the humans that mimic cube-shaped AI, which is not even humanoid, while *EEAI*s themselves simply drive human clients in taxis or carry out device-implant operations on humans without expressing any thoughts or emotions.

What is the Human Essence Then?

The binary opposition between human and machine as well as between "a hegemonic narrative" and "a counter-narrative of resistance" of dystopian novels (Baccolini, 2012, p. 38) would have been clearer in *Oshiko* if the story was told from Kopi-mama's viewpoint. Creativity and individuality are oppressed by the preference for machine-like homogeneity and efficiency in *Oshiko*'s world. Along with Kopi-mama, the founder of the Offline School is a character who could have been a freedom fighter in the machine-dominated world. However, this character is presented almost as a charlatan. At the school open day, she screams from the stage "365 days 24 hours offline!" "Live as human, do not be domesticated!" and other luring phrases aimed at the desperate parents whose children have offline addiction (25). It becomes clear, though, that she is trying to recruit their children to join the school to charge extremely high tuition fees. When Kopi-mama asks her how these children who grow up as individual "humans" can survive in the world full of "domesticated animals", the founder does not have an answer. The scene indicates how readily normal and abnormal can be turned around, and what might sound like common sense for one circumstance can sound like radical unrealistic extremism once it falls to the level of minority opinion.

This shows that individuality (originality) and "undomesticated" free-

dom are not to be glorified as human essence which is in binary opposition with the machines in *Oshiko*'s world.

After the disappointing visit to the Offline School, Kopi-mama implants a device in herself and tells Oshiko happily that she has finally started "functioning" as a human – and when the startled Oshiko asks what she means by "function", she answers "this capacity to tell oneself that the shit in front of you is not really shit, and swallow it" (39). Thus, the capacity to deceive oneself, to ignore one's own voice of conscience and eventually to adapt to anything. It is, indeed, one way to describe humans who, in essence, do change and evolve.

The human essence, which is its capacity to change and adapt without limit, does not stand in binary opposition with the machine – it will just adapt to it.

Defamiliarization through Language

Booker (1994, p. 3) suggests that defamiliarization is the "principal literary strategy of dystopian literature", and indeed, *Oshiko* takes place in a post-calamity Japan of the future, although the story is only about mothers whose children are at a nursery. The more important defamiliarization technique in *Oshiko* is its peculiar use of Japanese language which might cause difficulty in translating this work. The present section covers some features of language use in *Oshiko*, in connection with the themes discussed earlier. Language is used both as a machine to promote obscurantism within the novel's universe, and as a tool to make readers experience defamiliarization.

Firstly, all the characters have extremely weird names. The protagonist's name is Oshiko Bonji (凡事推子) written in Chinese ideograms vaguely meaning "promoting banal things", and furthermore is phonetically unusual. Other characters, such as her daughters or their teacher might have random sounds (such as Kopi which does not mean anything) or Chinese ideograms (for example, Hara 肚, meaning stomach), sometimes mixed with numbers or the European alphabet, reminding readers of random errors in character conversion. Similarly, classes in the nursery are named randomly. It is explained that there used to be an Apple class, Peach class etc., but to provide a more homogeneous education, the names which would cause concrete associations were changed to more

neutral ones, such as Zupopo class, which does not mean anything. The very meaninglessness of those names indicates what is considered homogenous and neutral in the world of *Oshiko* – there are no concrete associations which might lead to preferences or differences.

Secondly, intentionally unusual spellings are used throughout the novel. The Japanese language uses three types of characters – *hiragana* and *katakana* which are both phonetic alphabets, though the latter is normally used for loan words and onomatopoeias – and *kanji*, or Chinese ideograms. By using the wrong types of characters or by mixing them randomly, the text of *Oshiko* causes a disturbing unfamiliarity amongst readers. For example, the digital device called *Sumātofon* or smartphone should be written using *katakana* (スマートフォン), but instead it is written in *kanji* 須磨後奔 (5), which has a phonetically similar sound but is visually confusing, as Chinese ideograms carry meanings which are totally unrelated to the term itself. In other cases, terms which are normally written in Chinese ideograms are selectively written in *katakana*. The terms such as *kuni* (the country/central government, 8), *dokusōteki* (original, 4), and *kosei* (individual difference, 25) are all written in *katakana*, with the effect of making them sound less meaningful, as well as drawing readers' attention to these terms (and therefore the concepts).

Finally, many terms change their meaning within the novel and readers must learn what they mean. For example, when the term *Tōshitsu* (homogenous) is used in a line such as "her homogeneity capacity is growing rapidly recently" (15), readers understand that the lack of originality is considered an active (and measurable) capability. The *EEAI* mentioned in the previous section is another example – the term AI is given an additional meaning of "good love" under the government policy, and its insistent use in the media has normalised it. Changing or creating reality by manipulating language is a classical technique seen in dystopian literature and also in the real world.

Conclusions

The AI/human relationship and transhumanism presented in *Oshiko* seems to be a satire of the belief in a human essence which is in binary opposition to the machine. Motoya (2021b) comments in an interview that she is interested more in the majority who live easily than the minority,

and she does not "want to warn nor preach…simply would like to capture the humans that are continuously updated". This might collide with the definition of dystopian literature by Booker (1994, p.3), who states that it "constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems". As we have seen, although our protagonist Oshiko lives a contented life, the novel has numerous aspects typical of dystopian literature, such as technological dystopia, corporate dystopia or post-apocalyptic totalitarian dystopia which imposes obscurantism. It also uses a unique technique of defamiliarization through language. It might be argued, though, that the most important dystopic element of the novel is the crushing of the idealisation of mortal and transitory human essence. Not only do we not have free will and individuality that would struggle and suffer under the domination of efficient and immortal machines, but our very nature would make us change ourselves and capitulate to the machines, even when machines do not show any interest in mimicking humans.

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