

# Multiple Narratives in Searching for a Cat in Istanbul

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## Multiple Narratives in *Searching for a Cat in Istanbul*

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### 1.1. Introduction

In a globalized age, children's literature reflects the movement of people and exchange of cultures that are experienced by children in the real world (Gutierrez, 2018). Japanese children's literature also shows awareness of multicultural sphere sometimes (Doi, 2018). However, children's stories that are set in Middle Eastern countries are rare in Japan, so Etsuko Shindo is unique in that she mainly writes books set in Turkey and surrounding areas<sup>1</sup>. A unique blend of cultural reportage and fiction in Shindo's works offers young readers opportunities to experience the cultures of Turkey and surrounding areas in literary and imaginative ways. Her books for young readers also feature multi-ethnic and/or migrant characters, be it Turkish, Japanese, or mix-parentage children.

In the current climate of increased momentum for globalization in Japan, researching on children's literature about different cultures, countries, and experiences of them by child characters would be worthwhile as they show how books represent such topics, and how such books can affect children's awareness of and interests in cultures and migration. However, no academic paper has been written on Shindo's works for younger children so far. This paper attempts to fill the lacunae.

### 1.2. *Searching for a Cat in Istanbul*

This paper deals with one of Shindo's books for young readers, *Searching for a*

*Cat in Istanbul* (『イスタンブールで猫さがし』, 2015)<sup>2</sup>. It is set in contemporary Istanbul (Turkey), but unlike majority of Shindo's books, there is no fantasy element in the story. The main characters are two fifth-grade Japanese girls (10-11 years old), Ai and Mirai, who attend the Japanese School in Istanbul, and a sixth-grade mix-parentage Turkish-Japanese boy, Hayato, who attends Saturday Japanese language course held in the same building as the Japanese School (called "Supplementary School")<sup>3</sup>. The title of the book, "Searching for a Cat in Istanbul", refers to the main event of the story, in which Ai, Mirai, and Hayato look for a Turkish Van cat, a white cat with one green and one blue eye associated with the city of Van in eastern Turkey. The Van cat they search is a stray, but Hayato regards it as his own, and he has given it a Turkish-Japanese name, Miray (pronounced in the same way as Mirai). Hayato has written mysterious notes inviting its reader to come and see "his" Van cat. Ai and Mirai find the notes and visit Hayato. However, by the time they met him, the cat had disappeared. The main plot of the story develops around the efforts of the three children to find the cat, allegedly taken away by a "foreigner." Their search is helped by Ai's father, Yamano who is an Islamic architecture scholar on Sabbatical, a retired angler, Abdullah, local boy, Erkan, and carpet shop owners in the Grand Bazaar. Other characters include Hayato's mother, Yasumi, and her Turkish artist friend, Mine. The focalizing character is Ai, and the story is mainly narrated from her point of view. The narrative voice has both the first-person and the third-person elements<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.3. Methodology

The paper uses an interdisciplinary approach, and it is informed by both Children's Literature Studies and Child Studies. It employs the idea of intertextuality, especially Heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981) as well as the constructivist theories of narrative identity and meaning construction. Narrative is essential in creating one's identity (Bruner, 2004), and children negotiate social change, individual transition and personal identity by utilizing different narratives and metaphors (Wyn, 2015). This paper looks at narratives surrounding the Van cat and analyses the way characters engage in meaning

and identity construction through narratives. It also examines the way text uses such narratives for characterization as well as creating a multifaceted literary space. The paper concludes that the text has a polyphonic intertextual quality where different narratives coexist and compete to create and represent experiences of migrant children in Turkey with a Japanese background.

### **2.1. Competing narratives in *Searching for a Cat in Istanbul***

The text of *Searching for a cat in Istanbul* can be read as an example of Heteroglossia. The text has several competing voices, some more dominant than others. The opening of the story, which is set in a school library, hints the existence of multiple narratives surrounding children. The story begins in the library of Istanbul Japanese School where Ai finds a mysterious note hidden inside a library book. The note challenges its reader to identify a cat with one blue and one green one, illustrated in the note. A narrative of dream is hinted at as the library is called “The Room of Dreams,” where pupils sometimes fall asleep while reading books (9)<sup>5</sup>. One can detect a subtle allusion to *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* as Ai and Mirai go down the spiral staircase lead by Hayato’s note, and at the narrow bottom corner of the stairs, Ai bumps her head, and Mirai finds another little note inviting its reader to come and find the white Van cat (12-14).

The question of competing narratives and how to “read” and interpret events is highlighted in the text itself. For instance, Ai and Mine talk about two interpretations for a disappearance of a cat—Do cats find a dying place and go there when they are close to death? Or do they hide themselves in a quiet place to rest and recover in order to live?(55)—, and Mirai and Yamano discuss interpretations of a visit to downtown Istanbul —Is it a venture into a dangerous district without permission? Or is it an educational excursion led by a professional scholar?(144) Ai and Mirai also tackle the question of how to read Hayato’s mysterious notes which has accomplished illustrations of a Van cat and childlike handwriting of Japanese letters quite incongruous with the illustrations: Is it written by a child or by an artist, or is there any

other explanation for the incongruity? As I will discuss later, coexisting incongruity is itself a central theme of the story.

## **2.2. Mirai's mystery narrative**

One of the most dominant narratives in the story is that of a mystery. This narrative is constructed by Mirai, an avid mystery reader. The mystery narrative is presented early in the story, when Mirai expresses her wish to solve the “mystery” of Hayato’s notes and find the cat that has the same name (pronunciation) as herself (16, 19). This narrative forms a conspicuous frame of the story and moves the story in a linear fashion towards a specific Van cat (“Miray”). Mirai yarns the mystery narrative by making most decisions concerning the cat search: She proposes Ai that they should meet Hayato (16), she organizes a search party for the Van cat (56), gives a name to it (“MAT” standing for Miray Search Party in Japanese)(58), and decides who can be its member (90). Mirai also asks a lot of questions to other characters trying to establish facts and discerning logical reasons behind events like a detective in mystery books.

## **2.3. Ai's negated narrative of Van cats**

In contrast, Ai’s narrative about Van cats is not linear like Mirai’s mystery narrative. Ai expresses her yearning towards a Van cat, but as soon as this narrative of aspiration is presented, it is negated by herself. Ai admits that the idea of a Van cat is important in constructing her narrative of coming to Turkey. However, she reveals that the real reason of her leaving Japan is to “escape” from the classroom, where she faced a troubled “classmate relation” (22, 30). Ai uses the narrative of ‘Wishing to see Van cats’ because she needs a “positive motivation” for herself in order to say to herself, “I am not escaping. I am going for Van cats” (30).

## **2.4. Ai's metaphorical narrative of Van cats**

Ai’s narrative concerning the Van cats is more fluid and complex than Mirai’s linear mystery narrative. Ai negates the narrative of wanting to see a Van cat as just a

cover hiding her real motive, but images of a Van cat keeps on appearing in the text entangled with her emotions. In Ai's narrative, negation acts as a crucial act for more metaphorical signification (c.f. Derrida, 1976). At the beginning of the story, a Van cat is described as something she "longs to see but is hard to find" (8). Later (when Ai becomes more articulate), the image of a Van cat overlaps with Ai's guilt-ridden memory of a mix-parentage girl, Yukiko, whose eyes, "looked at two Worlds—Japan and Thailand" (109). The image of a Van cat also overlaps with Ai's perception of the city of Istanbul, which for Ai has two "eyes," Aghia Sophia and the Blue Mosque (113). Like the words Hayato's mother has written on her picture of the Van cat, "What can you see with two different colored eyes?" (62) is the question that comes to Ai's mind when the metaphor of the Van cat is conjured up. Rather than a linear narrative of looking for a specific Van cat, the images of a Van cat appear as a metaphor of Ai's fascination of, and emotional attachment to, cultural duality and coexistence of diverse perceptions. The appearance of the metaphor signals Ai's development in perceiving and expressing her idea and emotion more imaginatively<sup>6</sup>.

## **2.5. Hayato's narrative of possession, obligation, strategy, and confession**

Hayato constructs different narratives using the Van cat, negotiating his existence as a child of a Japanese and a Turkish parent living in Turkey. For Hayato, the Van cat is a pet that belongs to him, and a ploy to attract Japanese children. In Hayato's narrative, one can observe his strategy to use a Van cat as a cultural capital in order to create relationship and space for belonging among Japanese and Turkish children (Bourdieu, 1996, 1998).

In Hayato's eyes, the Van cat belongs to him because he "gave it a name and pet it" (77) every weekend when he visited the district where the cat lives. His act of naming may be read as an attempt to make a claim for a creature belonging to the locality, rather like an imperialist's claim for an indigenous object (Said, 1978). However, in a town where people "do not keep cats as pets at home" (31) or "take in stray cats" (55), but "leave food and water for cats" (69), Hayato's naming of the cat and claiming that it

is his is not accepted by local children. Hayato becomes angry when he found out that one of the local boys helped a “foreigner” to find and take the cat away (76), and becomes enraged when local children point out that the cat is not his, and that he is himself an outsider in the district, not a Turk but a Japanese, who has no right to be concerned about the cat that has been taken away by a “foreigner” (78). His emotional attachment to the stray cat, his insistence that the cat is his, and the violent reaction when being contradicted can be a representation of an unstable sense of identity experienced by a mix-parentage offspring, a theme Shindo has also pursued in another of her realistic story about a Japanese-Iranian boy living in Japan (*Hendawane no Tane*).

Rather than challenging the local children’s words that he is a Japanese and not Turkish, Hayato switches from a narrative of possession to that of an obligation and honor:

I promised the Japanese children that I would show them the Van cat if they came to see me. If the cat is not there, I cannot keep my promise, can I? (78)

This narrative is used strategically, as it is the language Turkish male such as Erkan understands (as asserted by a Turkish man, Abdullah later (50)) and accepts.

The narrative of obligation changes into a narrative of tactics, when Hayato explains his use of Miray as a ploy to lure readers of his notes by making them curious:

Hayato added in a sullen tone that pupils of Japanese School wouldn’t want to be friends with local children attending the Japanese language course. It is true that Ai [nor Mirai] thought about becoming friends with kids from the Japanese course. Ai didn’t even know about the existence of such a course.

“...I decided to use the Van cat to make the reader [of his note] curious. If the reader is interested in a Van cat, I thought he may come and meet me in order to see the Van cat.”

“That was a good ploy. We fell for it completely.”

“Yes, if there had not been the picture of the Van cat, we might not have come and met you.” (139-140)

Talking about it enables him to express his feelings towards Japan, Japanese children, and his own status in Turkey:

With a sad smile, Hayato shifted his eyes towards the dark strait outside. “I went to Japan last summer, but I couldn’t make any Japanese friends....They were kind at first, but soon nobody wanted to know. That’s only natural, ‘cause I cannot speak the ... dialect spoken in Mum’s hometown...and I can’t read any Chinese characters [used in Japanese writing]. No need to have any Japanese friends, I thought then, but coming back I wanted to have Japanese friends. You see, pupil in the Turkish school call me “Japon”(Japanese)...they ask me about Japan, but I don’t even have a Japanese friend...(140)

This confession prompts Mirai to tell him that she was interested in him as well as the Van cat because she was curious about the person writing mysterious notes. Ai could also express that his handwriting reminded her of Yukiko, who came from Thailand and who was not good at writing Japanese characters but made a lot of efforts to write them to express her feelings in Japanese. She wanted to be friends with her but couldn’t, so she wanted to meet Hayato who had similar handwriting (141-142). At this point, the search changes its nature, as three main characters become friends with a common pursuit of looking for something that Hayato regards precious, rather than the cat itself.

### **3.1. Narrative and Characterization**

By looking at the characterization in *Searching for a Cat in Istanbul*, it is possible to look at the kind of narratives the author uses in order to construct the characters and the fictional space of the story.

### **3.2. Mirai as an Archetype**

The characterization of Mirai matches the linear narrative of mystery in that her personality (mainly seen from Ai’s point of view) is also seen as being driven towards one goal. It can be said that Mirai has an archetypal role of an Animus in the text: a masculine quality within a woman, such as logical reasoning, creation by action, and

eloquent use of words (Jung, 1951, 1979). Mirai is depicted as someone who is good at Japanese and English, who does not hesitate to communicate with unfamiliar adults (or even with those who only speak Turkish), and who does not show any internal conflict or hesitation in telling lies to adults or ignoring school rules to attain her goal of finding the Van cat. Ai explains Mirai's behavior using a stereotype of "someone who has been abroad long" (18). As Mirai is only depicted from Ai's point of view, such representation reveals how Ai sees Mirai and how she positions herself against her.

### **3.3. Binary opposition as a character perception and literary space construction**

The characterization of Ai is formed by a binary opposition between Mirai and herself through Ai's eyes. In introducing Ai and Mirai at the beginning of the story, only qualities that are opposite are narrated. Thus, physically Ai is tall and Mirai is short, Mirai is sporty and Ai is clumsy, Ai is an inexperienced new comer to Japanese School abroad, whereas Mirai has spent most of her life abroad, attending Japanese School in different countries. In terms of personality, Mirai is active, decisive, logical, and, self-confident, whereas Ai is timid, emotional, and lacking self-confidence. Even their relationships to their parents are in contrast. Mirai sees her parents as someone inhibiting her from exploring Istanbul thus she feels the need to exclude them from her adventure. However, Ai is dependent on her father who is an expert of Islamic architecture, and knowledgeable about the city.

This binary opposition works as a representation of Ai's perception as well as an initial literary space from which the story is narrated. Ai longs to be like Mirai (98), and sees herself as the inferior of the two girls with opposing characteristics. In contrast to Mirai's purposeful proactive personality, Ai is represented as someone who has strong feelings but lacks direction: Even though it is Ai who knew about a Van cat when she discovered Hayato's note, and it is she who is supposed to be interested in seeing the cat, Ai can only express her emotion by saying, "How nice to give a name like Mirai to the cat.... How nice, I would love to see the cat" (16), but she does not think of doing anything to make her wish come true. As her emotional narrative do not have any

specific direction, she goes along with Mirai's mystery adventure narrative, in which there is a concrete Van cat, Miray, even though she is more generally interested in Van cats as a whole.

### 3.4. Ai's new voice

Ai wishes to be like Mirai, who "has ...[her] own idea, and express it clearly" (98). In the first half of the story, Mirai's mystery narrative, and Ai's yearning to be like Mirai drive the story forward. Halfway through the text, however, Ai acquires a new voice. The new voice emerges after two incidents: Her success in stopping a fight between Hayato and local boys by uttering a Turkish word (79)—an act even Mirai could not achieve—, and her realizing that even Mirai is not satisfied with her life. Mirai laments:

It's wonderful you have [grand parents'] places to visit during holidays. Look at me, I am Japanese, but I don't have home in Japan. Mum and Dad say I should be able to live anywhere in the world, but I don't want to go anywhere. I want to have my root in Japan. (95)

Mirai's dream of running a guesthouse in a rural part of Japan reflect her idea of an imaginary homeland which she can create for people who wish to have a home like herself. Mirai's dissatisfaction with her life puts Ai's unfocused wish of living and succeeding abroad in perspective. Now, she can articulate the real reason for leaving Japan:

...the Japanese think it is better to be the same as everybody else. They only worry about what other people would think and say, and believe they know the best. But they don't really know how people really feel. I want to get out of Japan. I want to get out and I want to be able to speak out my own mind. (99-100)

Once Ai has become able to articulate her mind, the guilt-ridden narrative about a memory of Yukiko appears in the text: how Yukiko was despised by classmates in Japan because she could not read or write Japanese well; how Ai's empathy with the girl, and her regret for not having helped her more, was not shared by other classmates

who suggested that Ai could also get out of Japan; and how she decided to get out of Japan because she had no true friend like Yukiko, and how she came to see a Van cat with different colored eyes because it reminds Ai of Yukiko (104-109).

The nature of Ai's narrative changes once she acquires the new voice. For example, a different narrative is constructed around Ai's perception of the Van cat. As she was interested in a Van cat in general, Ai's objective of seeing it would have been fulfilled when she saw a Van cat belonging to a carpet shop owner (115-116). However, the narrative records no emotional fulfilment on Ai's part, revealing the lack of emotional attachment to a concrete figure of a Van cat. Also, the excuse of going to see a Van cat becomes unnecessary once Ai can articulate the hidden cause of her departure from Japan.

Ai's narrative eventually subverts Mirai's linear narrative and gains dominance in the text. For example, Ai's illogical plea moves the plot more than Mirai's logical explanation of her desire to see the Van cat:

Mirai stepped forward and said, "I am called Mirai in Japanese. I am looking for the cat because I want to see the Van cat that has the same name as me...". Plodded by Mirai, Ai stepped forward and spoke, "My name is Ai in Japanese. I am not Mirai, but my name also exists in Turkey, so I want to meet Miray, too." Ai wasn't sure what she was saying herself....

"Ai?...My daughter is also called Ai, and she likes cats!...Follow me."(127)

Once she can use the metaphor of the cat in her narrative, Ai no longer need to find the actual Van cat. So, her decision to remain in MAT (the search party for the Van cat Miray) stems from her wish to have a common adventure with Mirai and Hayato. Unlike Mirai who was interested in both the concrete cat with the same name as her and Hayato, who was the author of the mysterious letter, Ai wanted to meet Hayato as his handwriting reminded her of Yukiko. At this point, Ai becomes able to see the connection between people important to her without the aid of the metaphor. The static narrative of unresolvable opposites changes into a more fluid narrative of metaphors

connecting different parts of the texts sometimes accidentally.

### 3.5. Narrative of awakening sexuality

Ai's metaphorical narrative gains dominance in the second half of the story, but there is also another narrative surrounding Ai. This is the narrative of awakening sexuality featuring a changing relationship and perspective concerning Ai's father. At the beginning of the story, Ai's father, Yamano, appears as a laid-back scholar on sabbatical who spends a lot of time going for a walk around and looking happier in the kitchen cooking Japanese foods than in the study working on PC. He is depicted as having a stooped shoulder and untidy hair, an appearance that always disappoints Ai (29). This depiction of Yamano shows Ai's limited perception as she mainly focuses on his "disappointing" appearance. Once Mirai becomes acquainted with Yamano, she focuses on a different side of him, as someone "cool" who knows a lot about Istanbul and a maze-like Grand Bazaar, who can cook delicious Japanese foods, and who is on children's side rather than imposing on adult values and restrictions like her parents. He is the man who can take Ai and Mirai outside "the safe zone" where Japanese people gather together, speak Japanese, eat Japanese foods, and generally be like when they are in Japan (93). Rather than looking at his appearance, Mirai introduces what Yamano can do.

The text also hints at a possibility of Yamano's sexual relationship with a Turkish woman. Towards the end of the story, Ai was shocked to see Yamano being hugged by Mine, a beautiful Turkish artist, who happened to be a daughter of the professor Yamano knew from long time ago. Seeing the "movie-like scene" of hugging, Mirai suggests the possibility of Yamano being Mine's lover, or her first love. Although such a possibility is denied by Ai, the hidden narrative of Yamano as a young man when he was studying in Istanbul is hinted at from his use of short Turkish words (27-28), and his revelation of the double meaning of Ai's name, having a Japanese meaning of "Love" and a Turkish meaning of "Moon" (a common female name).

Mirai also mention how "cool" Hayato and Erkan are. Thus introducing a different

way of looking at the boys other than a simple friendship (158, 162). In this way, Ai's awakening sexuality is another thread of the story, constantly hinted at by characters surrounding Ai, but not fully explored by Ai herself.

### **3.6. Hayato's narrative of resolution**

As we have seen, Hayato's narratives of the Van cat represent both his psychological state and his strategy to use narratives to suit the contexts. Once he could show "Miray" to Ai and Mirai, however, Hayato can let go of his desire to possess the cat. Rather than taking the cat back to where he usually feeds, Hayato is happy to see the cat traveling between Asian side and European side (like himself) on a fisherman's boat like Van cats in the city of Van. The story ends with Hayato smiling happily, looking just like his mother—the likeness the narrator (Ai) has not noticed until then (169). This last sentence shows that one of the important narratives of *Searching for a Cat in Istanbul* is that of resolution between Hayato's Turkish life and his Japanese side represented by his mother.

### **3.7. Posthumanist narrative of cats as the main characters**

*Searching for a Cat in Istanbul* has a postscript and a map of Istanbul. In the postscript, Shindo explains the history of Istanbul, but she also writes about cats of Istanbul, and how she feels that the cats are the real main characters of the city. In fact, the story depicts different cats and their behaviors. One way of reading the story would be reading cats as main characters, but for this paper, I wished to see narratives as the way it is used in characterization and identity construction, so the posthumanist discussion of the description of cats is beyond the scope of this paper.

## **4.1. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined different narratives that appear in *Searching for a cat in Istanbul*, and how they are used in characterization as well as creating a multifaceted literary space for the story. In terms of characterization, narratives are seen

as ways characters construct their identities, and narrative structures are also used to create polyphonic and intertextual space of fiction. The story includes a linear narrative of mystery, a metaphorical use of a negated narrative, a strategic use of different narratives to negotiate one's existence, and a narrative of awakening sexuality. The story hints at a dream narrative and shows the space of heteroglossia where different narratives coexist and compete for dominance. Etsuko Shindo has created a multifaceted space where the experiences of migrant child characters are depicted in its multiple existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from her non-fiction works for adult readers, Etsuko Shindo has published twelve fiction books for younger readers in the last twenty years. Her fiction books have several themes and styles: There are fantasy adventure novels set in Seljuk and Ottoman Turkey (Shindo, 1999, 2004, 2007), fantasy stories featuring time-travelling creatures in Kappadokia caves, Jinns (Islamic spirits), and a talking doll from Turkey (Shindo, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017), illustrated romantic stories with Middle Eastern carpet motives (Shindo, 1996; republished in 2016), and stories of children living in contemporary Turkey and Japan (Shindo, 2010, 2012, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This paper is first presented in IBBY 2018 Conference in Athens as an oral presentation. It is rewritten with significant alterations for this journal. English translation of the title and quotations for this paper are provided by this writer.

<sup>3</sup> As the text explains, Japanese children who are expected to go back to Japan at one point attend Japanese School whereas children who have at least one Japanese parent and usually attend local school or international school attend supplementary Japanese language course (13).

<sup>4</sup> In Japanese, a subject word in a sentence is often omitted, and it is common for children to use names rather than pronouns to refer to people including speaker herself. This makes it difficult sometimes to distinguish a first-person narrative from the third-person narrative in Japanese children's literature unless the narrative language clearly shows a formal

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adult-like tone which child characters would not use.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers refers to pages of Istanbul de Neko Sagashi (『イスタンブルで猫さがし』) Popula-sha, Tokyo, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> c.f. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980.

## 『イスタンブルで猫さがし』における多様な語り

大藪 加奈

近年、実社会で起こっている人の移動や文化の交流をうつしている児童文学は増えており、日本においても文化の多様性を意識させる作品が増えている。しかし、トルコやその近隣地域を舞台にした作品は少なく、その地域を舞台としている新藤悦子の作品は、ルポタージュと創作を組み合わせることで、子どもに異文化コミュニケーションを体験させるという点でユニークであるといえる。本論は、『イスタンブルで猫さがし』における多様なナラティブに注目し、登場人物と作品世界がそれぞれのナラティブによってどのように構築されているかを、児童文学と子ども学の観点から考察したものである。本論はミステリーや夢、いったん打ち消されたナラティブのメタファーとしての再登場、方策としての語りなど、それぞれ互いに競い合い、共存する語り、Heteroglossia としてのテキストを作り出していると論じている。