Who is holding the keys? Authorship and the role of the reader in Itō Seikō's *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* and *Back 2 Back*

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between intertextuality and authorship in the creative oeuvre of contemporary Japanese writer Itō Seikō (born 1961), focusing on two short stories collections: *Back 2 Back* (2012), written collaboratively with philosopher Sasaki Ataru (born 1973), and *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* (*Stories that Do Not Exist*, 2013). It provides a close overview of one particular story that appears in both collections under different titles – as story "Number Six" in *Back 2 Back* and "Atashi" in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*. The article argues that comparing the stories might shed some light on how they employ the concept of the death of the author. Both versions question the roles of the author and reader in interpreting a text but approach this theoretical issue differently. Story "Number Six" from *Back 2 Back* uses the images of a fictional author and reader as adults, highlighting the power inequality between them and portraying the reader as more powerful than the author. In contrast, "Atashi" employs a similar motif but inverts it humorously, making both the author and the reader appear equally clueless about their supposed roles. It accomplishes this by depicting them as children who mimic the same debate from a different angle and thus showcase its inherent fluidity. The article compares the interactions between fictional authors and readers in both stories through the lens of Roland Barthes' concept of the death of the author. In this comparison, "Atashi" is perceived as a rewrite of story "Number Six."

1   Introduction

What is the author trying to say in this text? All literature classes in my middle and high school years revolved around this question. The author (almost always a He, almost always long-dead, almost always distant) wanted to convey something to me as a reader. I was expected to guess his meanings, decipher his words, and read his clues. In my school, I had three literature classes: one for my national language, one for my first language, and one for "world literature," which in practice meant anything from European classics to Bashō. In all three classes, authors always wanted to convey some meanings in their texts. My task, therefore, was to become a telepath and discover what exactly those meanings were.

This emphasis on telepathy in school literature classrooms is not unique to any one country. In fact, it would not be hard to surmise that, even today, authorial intention often

dominates interpretation in many non-professional settings. Literary studies, on the other hand, challenge this tendency by questioning what both the author *and* the reader can say about the text.

The notion that authors do not solely determine, but merely play a secondary role in the process of meaning-making within a text has been the subject of continuous debate. It began with Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* (1967) and evolved in later works by Michael Foucault (1969) and Harold Bloom (1973), developing further in a wide variety of directions. Within Japanese literature, this idea has been debated, adapted, and challenged by figures such as Tanaka Minoru (1997, 2017, etc.), Yamanaka Masaki (2013), and others.

Following Barthes' suggestion that the "birth of the reader" will inevitably occur "at the cost of the death of the Author,"[1] different theories, such as reader response proposed by Stanley Fish, have emphasized the role of the reader in meaning-making. This multiplicity of approaches points to the inherent complexity of the topic. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to list all possible interpretations, I offer a case study from contemporary Japanese literature that builds upon Barthes and the death of the author. As will be elaborated further, both of the analyzed stories reflect the binary opposition between the author and the reader, a concept also evident in Barthes' essay.

Itō Seikō (born 1961), active in a variety of creative fields from radio to podcasting, serves as a prime example of a highly versatile author. From *Sōzō rajio* (*Radio Imagination*, 2013), which narrates a story of the victims of the 2011 tsunami, to the dystopian *I Subscribe to the Novel Prohibition Law* (*Shōsetsu kinshirei ni sandō suru*, 2018), depicting writing as an act of resistance against censorship, he is renowned for working on a wide range of topics. The focus of the present paper is on two collections of short stories, *Back 2 Back* (2012), co-authored with philosopher Sasaki Ataru (born 1973), and *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* (*Stories that Do Not Exist*, 2013). Seemingly unrelated at first glance and exploring different themes, these texts can of course be read independently. However, if read together, they appear as a direct continuation of each other. In *Back 2 Back*, a short story named "Atashi" (Me) is *mentioned* but never made accessible to the reader, existing only in the form of retelling by one of the characters. Published a year later, *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* contains a short story of that same title, albeit retold from the first-person perspective. Yet what does this transformation signify?

To address this question, the present paper focuses on the images of fictional authors and readers as portrayed in two texts, the story "Number Six" from *Back 2 Back* and "Atashi," the third story from *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu.* It analyzes the conversations conducted between authors and readers in both stories through the lens of the death of the author. While both texts can be seen as engaging with Barthes' notion, they manifest it differently. Story "Number Six" creates a situation in which the author and the reader can converse

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[1] BARTHES 1977: 148.

directly with each other. The power imbalance in their relationship becomes immediately evident, as the author is dependent on the reader's evaluation. The tension between the author trying (and eventually succeeding) to influence his reader's opinion becomes a prominent motif in the story. Ultimately, story "Number Six" shows the impossibility of a completely unbiased interpretation.

On the contrary, "Atashi" from *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* approaches a similar problem from another angle. Both the author and the reader in the story are portrayed as school-aged girls. Their conversations about writing and authorship make them appear naïve and unaware of any kind of disposition between authors and readers. Unlike the two adult male characters from story "Number Six," they are only beginning their journey and do not yet have stable criteria to measure a text against. While this setting once again proves that any interpretation is biased and depends on many factors, from age to cultural background, it also presents "Atashi" as a rewrite of story "Number Six." The text not only allows us to read the full version of the story that the fictional author and reader are discussing in *Back 2 Back*, but also reiterates their very discussion.

The present article contrasts both stories with a particular focus on their framings and endings. Borrowing from Barthes and the study of interpretation, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do the power relationships in story "Number Six" and "Atashi" challenge the premise of either the author or the reader holding the keys to the interpretation of a text, as postulated by Barthes?
2. How does "Atashi" manifest itself as an adaptation and a rewrite?

Analyzing both of these points has two aims: exploring less-discussed aspects of Itō's texts and highlighting the fluidity of the image of authorship in his stories. Ultimately, this fluidity is not unique to Itō's creative oeuvre, as debates on this topic have been ongoing in Japanese literature for years. Some of these debates will be specifically referenced while discussing the death of the author in section 4.

To find possible answers to the above-mentioned questions, the article first outlines the concept of rewritings and the related category of adaptation, then moves on to the death of the author. After that, it analyzes each story and compares them within this theoretical framework. The conclusion synthesizes the concepts of the death of the author and rewriting by theorizing about the author-reader dynamic in both stories.

2   Author introduction

Itō Seikō is a Japanese writer and TV personality active in a wide range of fields, including music, radio, and podcasting. He uses a pseudonym written in *hiragana*, but his real name has the same reading in *kanji*. After debuting with *No Life King* (*No raifu kingu*) in 1988, Itō became a prolific writer. Due to writer's block, he took a hiatus between 1997 and 2013

which he claims to have overcome through the publication of *Sōzō rajio* (*Radio Imagination*, 2013).[2] In his books, Itō actively experiments with different writing styles and incorporates references to literary theory and pop culture.

Even though he receives significant attention as a media personality, he seldom appears in academic discourse. However, *Sōzō rajio*, his tribute to the victims of the tsunami that followed the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, stands as a rare exception. Since its initial publication, it has been discussed from various perspectives in both Japanese and English research.[3] This article focuses on two of his less known short stories collections: *Back 2 Back* (2012) and *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* (*Stories that Do Not Exist*, 2013). The first one was co-authored with Sasaki Ataru while the second was written solely by Itō. Furthermore, *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* is presented as a collection of translations, whereas *Back 2 Back* is framed as a collection of original fictional texts. While the scope of this article limits the focus to two particular stories from both collections, they were chosen for how illustrative they are in demonstrating the framework of the death of the author.

The co-author of *Back 2 Back*, Sasaki Ataru, is a contemporary Japanese writer and philosopher. In 2008, he compiled a collection of essays *Night Battle and Eternity* (*Yasen to eien*), showcasing his deep familiarity with French critical theory. Since then, he has published both philosophical and literary texts. Although he hasn't announced any new books since 2016, he remains active academically, teaching writing and philosophy.

In *Back 2 Back*, co-authorship undoubtedly plays an important role, as both writers converse through their stories and borrow each other's motifs. In some stories,[4] Itō and Sasaki use the same characters and metaphors, creating a plot in which all of them are interconnected in one way or another. The stories can therefore be read as a stream-of-consciousness polylogue that gradually expands in different directions, ultimately addressing the empirical reader. A similar structure can be seen in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, where an unnamed narrator often talks to an imagined reader – asking questions, challenging, confusing, and thanking them. While the conversational nature of both collections is crucial for a fuller comprehensive analysis, this article will focus on one specific aspect: the dialogues between fictional authors and readers within the two short stories.

Before exploring these dialogues, the next section introduces two important keywords: 'rewriting' and 'adaptation'. Both terms will be especially relevant for the later comparison of the two versions of "Atashi." Another key concept – the death of the author – is outlined in Section 4, where the reason for choosing this particular approach to analyze the stories is also provided.

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[2] Hoshino/Itō: "Sōzō rajio taidan Itō Seikō×Hoshino Tomoyuki sōzō sureba zettai ni kikoeru (zenpen) – Kawade Shoboshinsha." https://www.kawade.co.jp/souzouradio/talk01.html (last accessed 20.09.2024).

[3] Kimura 2013; Aoki 2014; Sugie 2018; De Pieri 2021.

[4] In particular, stories six to ten.

3   Rewritings and adaptations

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, "Atashi," along with the other stories from *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, is introduced as a translation. Therefore, it could be productive to apply some concepts from translation studies to analyze the text. One such concept is rewriting. André Lefevere, in his works pays close attention to how the act of rewriting, tightly interwoven with the act of translation, is always associated with manipulation and invariably involves adjusting the original text. The reasons for these adjustments range from ideological constraints imposed by various institutions holding power in a certain country to purely aesthetic considerations. However, regardless of the reason, they often necessitate alterations to the original source. Rewriting is deliberate by default, albeit not necessarily negative per se. While possessing the ability to alter public discourse, it allows for both restrictive and innovative changes. According to Lefevere,

> Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices, and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain […][5]

In his writings, Lefevere often discusses rewriting in relation to translation. Consequently, many of his examples involve rewrites carried out by someone other than the original author, frequently in a different cultural context or time period than the original. Nevertheless, I would argue that cases like "Atashi," rewritten by the same author just one year after its initial publication, can still be discussed within the same framework and retain some features that Lefevere attributes to other rewrites – particularly the manipulation of the original.

Similarly to Lefevere, Edwin Gentzler embraces the plurality of rewriting and emphasizes that "all writing is rewriting, or better said, a rewriting of a rewriting of a rewriting, and translation – intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic – plays a significant role in that process."[6] Proposing that "all writing is rewriting," he refers to the idea of palimpsest first postulated by Gérard Genette. In Genette's interpretation, each new written text is based on at least one preexistent text. The texts, therefore, constantly converse with each other. Gentzler applies this idea to translation, combining it with Lefevere's observations on rewriting.

Another keyword often associated with texts (or even different mediums) interacting with each other is adaptation. Linda Hutcheon provides three basic definitions of adaptation:

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[5] LEFEVERE 2017: 3.
[6] GENTZLER 2016: 10.

a formal entity or product, a process of creation, and a process of reception. The first definition is the most relevant to the analysis in this article. According to it, adaptation is a broad technique that can be extended to include a "shift of medium (a poem to film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation."[7]

As will be evident from further discussion, "Atashi" *can* be seen as both a "rewrite" of a story-within-a-story that appears in *Back 2 Back* and, simultaneously, as its "adaptation." By changing the point of view from third to first person, Itō allows Shiti, the main character of "Atashi," to speak in her own voice. At the same time, he consistently maintains the intertextual connection to the first version, making it possible to follow the same simple plot in two very different framings.

To see this connection, however, the empirical reader[8] needs to read the versions of the story from both *Back 2 Back* and *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*. Adaptation studies provide two useful terms to describe the difference between the audiences exposed to the text: the knowing and unknowing audience. As Hutcheon notes, "if we do not know that what we are experiencing actually is an adaptation or if we are not familiar with the particular work that it adapts, we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work."[9] Both versions of "Atashi" can be read independently in two different framings. *Back 2 Back* weaves the story into a discussion on authorship that continues later in the collection.[10] *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, on the other hand, presents "Atashi" as a translation and shifts the focus to intercultural interactions. At the same time, it reiterates the conversation between the author and the reader started in story "Number Six" using it as a subplot.

To further examine the similarities and differences between the two stories, it is important to first introduce the vantage point from which to view them. The following section outlines the concept of the death of the author and some of its later developments before applying it to the texts.

4   The death of the author and its implications

The debates on authorship have a long and complicated history, which can be approached from different angles. In the discussion below, I specifically focus on the concept of the death

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[7] HUTCHEON 2012: 8.
[8] Despite some limitations of the term, here and in the following I will refer to those who are reading the texts of story "Number Six" and "Atashi" as the "empirical reader(s)."
[9] HUTCHEON 2012: 120.
[10] Of particular interest are two other stories from the same collection, number seven (written by Sasaki Ataru) and eight (written by Itō Seikō), both of which expand the conversation on the author-reader interactions.

of the author and introduce some relevant observations from both English and Japanese research.

In his 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes perceives writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[11] This perspective is both enticing and somewhat utopian. From a Barthesian standpoint, writing itself assumes the form of an undefinable abstract "space" in which one's identity is dissolved in service of the text. Freed from authorial presence, the text becomes the responsibility of the reader, who must interpret it without the intervention of a godlike author. At the same time, it cannot remain entirely self-enclosed and instead is seen as a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" or, speaking in other terms, an intertext.[12] Within this framework, no idea is entirely novel, and the author merely weaves the text from elements already written – for the reader to interpret.

In his essay, Barthes confidently rejects the notion of the Author with a capital A, who is essentially equated with God, stating that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[13] Once liberated from the authorial presence, all the reader gains access to is the text itself. Ultimately, they thus become the "space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost."[14] Nevertheless, the question remains unresolved: is the reader powerful enough to trace back all the quotations and references? This uncertainty becomes particularly pertinent in cases where authorship holds legal significance.

Matías Martínez (1999) presents a scenario possible for both tangible arts and literature: the question of plagiarism. One of the examples provided – a sculpture and a black-and-white photo that look similar – illustrates the importance of authorship in determining the primary source of an idea.[15] In a legal setting, determining which work was created first takes on special importance. At the same time, however, such cases highlight the ambiguity of authorship. The author, declared "dead" by Barthes, must come back to life in court.

Michel Foucault (1969) approaches a similar problem from the perspective of what he terms the "author function." By examining the broader social and historical implications of authorship, Foucault suggests perceiving it as part of a wider discourse rather than as an abstract concept. The author's name in particular is never just a proper name but "has other than indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description."[16] Texts do not exist in a vacuum; they always carry

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[11] BARTHES 1977: 142.
[12] BARTHES 1977: 146.
[13] BARTHES 1977: 147.
[14] BARTHES 1977: 148.
[15] MARTíNEZ 1999.
[16] FOUCAULT 1999: 209.

someone's responsibility, both metaphorically and legally, and the person to whom they are attributed can also become subject to punishment. Ultimately, where Barthes sees writing as a space where identity dissolves, Foucault demonstrates how the authorial presence never entirely leaves a text.

The question of authorship becomes even more complicated when considering Japan. Of particular relevance is *That Wonderful Composite Called Author* (2014) edited by Christian Schwermann and Raji C. Steineck, which aims to problematize the application of Western theories to various Asian contexts. The editors state that:

> The author that needed to 'die' was the author with a capital A, the figure of an omnipotent source of the text and its meaning. This author concept has been demonstrated to be the product of a specific cultural discourse. Far from being universal, it is firmly embedded in European classical modernity.[17]

In other words, both the cultural context and the time period in which a certain text was written inevitably become essential when discussing authorship. While considering this observation, it is important to note that applying a Barthesian framework to contemporary Japanese literature is not necessarily a futile endeavor, as no culture can survive without interaction with the others. Kan Nozaki (2015) notes that:

> […] it is doubtless that the problems proposed by Barthes and Foucault have inevitably changed something; even when it seems that the author has now returned in contemporary research and critique, we should be aware that this revival itself was preceded by the death of the author.[18]

While two cultural contexts can never be equated as the same, the death of the author can be observed resonating in various iterations across borders, albeit with distinct manifestations. Schwermann and Steineck provide an overview of how this concept was perceived in various Asian literatures, emphasizing that at first glance, it might be possible to argue that the notion of an individual, specific author wasn't present in them until modernity. However, as they point out:

> We can also choose not to project a modern view of authorship as a "one-man show" onto the various literary traditions and instead allow the different author functions, the most important being origination, responsibility (including authority), and meaning function, to be distributed among several individuals.[19]

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[17] SCHWERMANN/STEINECK 2014: 1.
[18] NOZAKI 2015: 114. All translations from Japanese are mine.
[19] SCHWERMANN/STEINECK 2014: 20.

In Japan, the concept of the death of the author has been explored from various angles, not only within the realms of literature but also in other fields, including aesthetics. From Yoshiko Ishikawa (1987) to Minoru Tanaka (1997, 2017), numerous attempts have been made to situate the death of the author within the Japanese context and use it as a foundation for novel theories. In this process, the cultural blend of both Japanese and so-called "Western" practices becomes particularly relevant. Even though not all research papers attempt to build upon Barthes, some, such as Minoru Tanaka and his *daisankō* theory, actively debate his ideas. Tanaka in particular complicates the debate by suggesting that, beyond the author and the reader, there is always something in the text that cannot be fully comprehended by anyone.

Notably, just as in the original essay written by Barthes, in many instances the focus is still placed on the author as a singular figure. One possible reason may lie in the constraints imposed by equating the author with an (equally singular) God image. In fact, this idea is taken even further in the essay when Barthes states:

> The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book […]
> The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child.[20]

Whether depicted as a father or as God, the author with a capital A in Barthes is not portrayed in the plural form. However, as made clear by observations from Steineck and Schwermann, unlike the Barthesian ideal of a singular author, the image of the author in Japanese literature (and other Asian literatures) is often more complex. While their investigation primarily concerns pre-modern times, there is also evidence of composite authorship appearing in Meiji literature. Isabelle Lavelle points out how the practice of employing ghostwriters, known as *daisaku*, has often been utilized even by prominent writers back then stating that "it is only gradually, with the idea of the original genius taunted by European Romanticism becoming widely accepted, that using *daisaku* became a frowned-upon practice in Japan."[21]

In his article on authorship in Japanese literature up until the seventeenth century, Haruo Shirane makes a similar point, analyzing it as primarily a hierarchical and collective effort. Of particular interest are his observations on the readers (or spectators) in the creative process of *renga* poems. They are not merely observers but actively participate in the performance, borrowing from each other which ultimately creates a place where "several originators, writers, performers all weave several different versions of the text."[22]

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[20] Barthes 1977: 145.
[21] Lavelle 2021: 160.
[22] Shirane 2021: 18.

In this context, oral texts can be viewed as perfect demonstrations of a tissue of quotations. However, due to the improvisatory nature of the poems, they also never remain completely static. These collective performances, born within the so-called "participation culture," may appear irrelevant to both contemporary Japan and non-performative arts. Yet, as Shirane argues, neither is necessarily true. He perceives this trend as both local and global, exemplified by manga and *dōjinshi* magazines that organize various contests among readers to discover new writers. This discussion can extend even further if we consider the other agents that work with the texts such as editors, redactors, or translators. Moreover, in many cases, both previous texts and new ones inevitably connect and reverberate with each other.

Overall, the concept of the death of the author remains influential, though still debatable, even today. However, the various directions in which it has evolved raise questions about whether it can still be fully applied to the analysis of contemporary texts – and particularly Japanese literature. I would argue that it remains a productive vantage point to discuss story "Number Six" and "Atashi." By strictly separating the "author" and the "reader" into binary categories, Barthes creates a simplified model applicable across cultural contexts. Moreover, as demonstrated in the analysis below, the interactions between characters in both of Itō's stories reflect this model, portraying fictional readers as trying to exercise power over fictional authors. While Foucault's concept of the author function could offer an alternative approach to these stories, I propose viewing the death of the author as a way to capture how the conversations between the fictional characters challenge the idea of either the author or the reader dominating the interpretation of a text.

However, taking into account both cultural differences and the passage of time, I will selectively adopt only those points from Barthes' essay that are especially applicable to the current discussion. Particular focus will be placed on the roles of the author and the reader in the creation and interpretation of a text. Examining how Barthes assigns the responsibility and power either to the author or the reader – but never both – will shed light on how Itō partly agrees with this disposition in story "Number Six" but then further challenges it in "Atashi." The discussion below will proceed in the order of the stories' publication, beginning with *Back 2 Back*.

5   *Back 2 Back*: The powerful reader, the powerless author?

Back 2 Back (2012) was first published online in 2011 on Ataru Sasaki's official website.[23] This collection of stories, written in turns with Itō Seikō, was a tribute to the victims of the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster. Although the two first stories are still accessible on the web, the full version is currently only available as a physical book. The collection comprises ten short stories followed by two afterwords, one from each writer. Some stories can be

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[23] Sᴀsᴀᴋɪ: https://www.atarusasaki.net/ (last accessed 21.09.2024).

read as replies to each other while some rely on associations and stream of consciousness. In the later stories, the encouragement to persevere and not give up becomes increasingly prominent. Although the collection does not explicitly address the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster, it implicitly uses it as a backdrop. The present section in particular focuses on story "Number Six" written by Itō Seikō.

The story consists of several layers – an unnamed narrator is reading a short piece called "Atashi" while talking to its author, a Malaysian writer named Rahmat Ramanan. This fictional conversation between the unnamed reader and the writer is further complicated through the presence of a second reader, namely the empirical reader of *Back 2 Back*. While one only learns a few facts about the nameless narrator, specifically, that he is a self-proclaimed fan of Ramanan and is seen by him as a representative of a "typical non-Western reader" (*heikintekina hiōbei dokusha no daihyō*)[24], much more information is provided about the fictional writer, ranging from his age to biographical details.

The narrator acts as a mediator between the empirical reader and the fictional writer by recounting the plot of "Atashi." The story's main character is a Malay girl named Shiti, who is proficient in sign language. She gets lost in Chinatown and encounters a deaf Chinese man with whom she can communicate effortlessly through gestures and signs, despite not understanding any spoken Chinese. Eventually, Shiti returns home safely but is invited to visit again. As evident from this brief summary, the plot is exceedingly simple, but it is the framing and the ensuing conversation between the fictional author and the narrator that warrant special attention.

Initially, the narrator refuses to acknowledge any connections the story might have to Ramanan's biography. He becomes rather annoyed when Ramanan attempts to explain the background, fearing that it might influence his own judgment:

> "I see," was the only thing I said. It was the first time Rahmat had ever explained the background to me before I read the actual work. Both of us, being avid readers, knew perfectly well that this could create biases that would cloud my vision during the reading.[25]

The personal is not permitted to intrude, as it could compromise the reading experience. Drawing from the Barthesian interpretation of writing as a "neutral" space, one can observe how reading in the story assumes a similar role. At first, all the narrator wants to rely on while evaluating "Atashi" is the text itself, thus dismissing any additional information as redundant. However, this endeavor to separate the text from its author is ultimately proven futile when the narrator suddenly recognizes himself in one of the characters, On Yō. Initially regarding it as a mere coincidence or joke, he is taken aback to discover that this

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[24] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 58.
[25] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 58.

resemblance was intentional. As a result, he is now drawn into the story, compelled to confront all the references to Ramanan's life it contains. This prompts him to recall his own experiences and perceive "Atashi" within the framework of the earlier stories written by his interlocutor: "As someone who had read his previous works, it wasn't difficult for me to guess the reason for his sensitivity."[26]

The narrator is thus different from the empirical reader and has access to earlier intertextual references. This makes him the very "space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost" Barthes talks about in the essay, an idealistic image indeed.[27] The ability to compare the text with earlier works and the author's biography allows him to approach interpretation from an angle that empirical readers do not possess.

While highlighting the inequality between both fictional and empirical readers, story "Number Six" simultaneously serves as an attempt to play with and subvert traditional author-reader relationships. The nameless narrator is introduced as an "ideal" reader – one who knows all the facts, reads all the books, and can even directly ask questions. Ultimately, he even exercises this privilege by inquiring about the authorial interpretation of the ending. Upon revealing that Ramanan's own mother is also deaf, and considering that all of his previous texts have addressed the topic of disabilities, the narrator cannot help but prompt Ramanan to admit the highly biographical nature of the story: "Isn't Shiti the same as you, the image that embodies the hopes of your mother?"[28]

Ramanan immediately agrees and the narrator quickly shifts from being unsure about how to evaluate the text to celebrating it. He later further pressures the author to declare that Shiti's last message to her new friend was a promise to become a bridge between the deaf and the non-deaf. This conclusion satisfies his expectations, so he ends his own story with praise: "I equally celebrated the image of Shiti, who was trying to connect with the blind on the other side, Ramat's mother, who continued to use sign language with him, and finally, himself – the writer attempting to venture out into a new world."[29]

When read from the perspective of author-reader interactions, it becomes evident how closely the plot is tied to the notion of power. The relationship between fictional author and fictional reader in the text is unequal and codependent – Ramanan relies on evaluation from his "non-Western reader representative," yet the narrator is not entirely unbiased. He is inevitably influenced by biographical resemblance and intertextual connections which shape the interpretation of Shiti's story. Moving away from attempts to provide a neutral evaluation, he illustrates how objectivity in the reading experience is never achievable. He cannot remain outside of the text; in fact, he must immerse himself in one of the characters

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[26] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 63.
[27] Barthes 1977: 148.
[28] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 64.
[29] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 65.

and perceive it from a more personal standpoint. Ultimately, this immersion extends to establish a direct link between the fictional and the biographical, further exemplified by the narrator's acceptance of Ramanan's authorial interpretation of the ending as the "correct" one.

The readers of *Back 2 Back* have only indirect access to "Atashi," which leaves them with no option but to accept it. However, as demonstrated in the below discussion of "Atashi" in the context of *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, it is hardly the only possible approach. The next section further expands on the conversation on authorship by analyzing the author-reader interactions within the second version of the story. By reusing the same plot but erasing the narrator who retells it, Itō Seikō subtly distinguishes it from *Back 2 Back*, yet still enables readers to perceive the connection. However, the interpretation may vary depending on whether the texts are read together or separately. To explore this distinction, it will be necessary to approach "Atashi" as a rewrite of story "Number Six."

6   "Atashi": The illusion of an open ending

In *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, "Atashi" follows the exact same plot as the short story described in *Back 2 Back* – but within a completely different framework. Like other pieces in the same collection, the text is initially introduced as a translation. Of special interest are the interactions between the main character Shiti and her classmate, Salma, which yet again mimic the motif of a reader talking to an author. Unlike the previous reader we have encountered in story "Number Six," Salma is more supportive and enthusiastic. She praises Shiti's school compositions despite their highly unconventional storylines, such as detailed descriptions of a corpse, or contemplations on the feeling of shame caused by her brother's and mother's deafness. Without even being directly asked, Salma is always ready to provide an evaluation of the texts and emphasizes that "your compositions are the coolest. You're destined to become a celebrated writer!"[30]

However, Shiti herself is ashamed of her writings, which often face harsh critique from her schoolteacher. Consequently, she dismisses both Salma's praise and her promises to always be her reader. As a result, the conversations remain one-sided. Moreover, she is portrayed as a very inexperienced writer who has never seriously considered her texts as something worth reading. For example, when Salma tries to explain the true pleasure of reading, Shiti is perplexed and not particularly persuaded:

-   It's like some sort of happiness when you are able to understand the feelings of
    the writer. As if you yourself become useful somehow.

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[30] Itō 2013: 96.

- I see.

- Shiti, I bet you don't get it at all.

- I don't.[31]

In the story "Number Six" in *Back 2 Back*, both the narrator and the fictional author are portrayed as older and more well-versed in literature. In contrast, Shiti and Salma are depicted as two school-aged girls who have yet to fit into the roles of the "educated" author and reader. This juxtaposition can even be interpreted as deliberate and humorous, as the narration shifts from contemplations on literature to Shiti's attempts to understand the role writing plays in her life.

The story gradually shifts, too, turning into a manifestation of embracing the differences. As Shiti gets lost in Chinatown, the motif of writing loses its importance, replaced by her interactions with On Yō and his wife. She only returns to writing at the end, resolving to write about her Chinatown experience: "I'm planning to write about it in another composition for Mrs. Sharifa. It will be a lengthy one, but I'm confident that Salma, at least, will appreciate it."[32]

The ending, which is "spoiled" in *Back 2 Back*, remains open in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, allowing for slightly differing interpretations. This is particularly illustrative when analyzed from the perspective of rewriting and adaptation theory.

The endings of both the sixth story and "Atashi" can be read independently of each other and function in two different contexts. In *Back 2 Back,* the ending of the story-within-a-story becomes part of a conversation – and a final proof of how the narrator gives in to his preexisting knowledge of Ramanan's life. He is not satisfied with the ambivalence and asks the author himself to explicitly state what exactly Shiti wanted to say. To start "celebrating" "Atashi" as an example of embracing the differences, he needs a definite answer – and Ramanan willingly provides it: "She said, 'Now I'm connecting both worlds together.' I thought it didn't need to be written, but I'm sure that's what she must have said."[33]

This response further solidifies the narrator's desire to connect the story to Ramanan's life, so that in the end, he is not just praising the plot but simultaneously praises the author and his deaf mother for all the struggles they endured. In "Atashi," the unnamed narrator never appears, allowing the empirical reader to access the "actual" text. Its ending, however, remains open for interpretation – unless someone reads both the sixth story in *Back 2 Back* and "Atashi." Although the two do not depend on each other to function, the existence of two separate iterations invites a comparison between them.

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[31] Itō 2013: 101.
[32] Itō 2013: 122.
[33] Itō/Sasaki 2012: 65.

Experiencing "Atashi" from *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* as an adaptation would not only entail closely linking it to story "Number Six" but also focusing on the subtle differences between the two, especially regarding the ending. The empirical reader shifts from reading a text *about* Shiti to viewing it *through* her gaze. This change in tone colors the perception of the debate initiated in *Back 2 Back*, as it now becomes possible to incorporate the humorous exchanges on writing that Shiti has with her friend into the previous pieces. The motif of writing per se is merely a subplot in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, which can be easily overlooked in favor of the main plot. It is only through the lens of knowing audiences that one can begin to attach more importance to it.

"Atashi" can also be perceived as a rewrite of story "Number Six." Like many other rewrites, it inevitably involves a degree of manipulation. Of particular interest is how the conversation between the fictional author and reader is made more humorous by portraying both participants as younger and female specifically. In story "Number Six," the gender of the unnamed narrator is initially unknown but is eventually revealed to be male. Both he and Ramanan thus converse from the positions of two highly educated men, well-versed in critical theory and aware of the potential influence of the reader on the writer. In contrast, in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*, a similar dialogue is rewritten from the perspective of two female school students, making their interactions sound innocent. The humor in the story thus reinforces the pre-existing gender biases.

The stories reverberate with each other on both textual and paratextual levels. To make the connection even more obvious, Itō explicitly states it in the editor's note that accompanies "Atashi" in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu*: 'Atashi' is my attempt to mimic a translation. The original text is from a collection published on May 16, 2011 (*Back 2 Back*, co-authored with Sasaki Ataru)."[34] This note links the two together, inviting readers to shift from being an unknowing audience to a knowing one.

7   Conclusion – Who (mis-)interprets a text?

Both of the discussed texts play with the notion of authorship. Story "Number Six" from *Back 2 Back* highlights how the reader can never fully lead the interpretation of the text, as they are never able to remain completely unbiased. At the same time, "Atashi" from *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* aborts the conversation right from the start, making Shiti imperceptive to Salma's opinion. Eventually, however, she comes to accept Salma as someone who would appreciate her compositions.

Both stories reiterate the same plot, but with slightly different endings. In story "Number Six," the empirical reader learns about the ending from the fictional author himself, which imposes the authorial intention upon them. Through the double layer – from fictional author

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[34] Itō 2013: 125.

to fictional reader – the readers are guided towards what is presumed to be the "correct" interpretation. On the other hand, *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* challenges this very approach by leaving the ending open.

What these stories have in common is the way they negotiate the death of the author, demonstrating the impossibility of impartial interpretation. "Atashi" in *Sonzai shinai shōsetsu* only reinforces the point first iterated in *Back 2 Back*: that interpretation of the text is never unbiased, and no reader (as well as no author) can ever be neutral. Neither party is dead in the Barthesian sense, as the process of interpretation is still influenced by external factors and preexisting knowledge. Ultimately, the (mis)interpretation of any text lies in the eyes of the beholder, which makes the image of the author and reader fluid. When addressing whether this image is found in theoretical debates or in the child's play the answer is both simple and complicated – for it can be found in both.

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