Why Hiroshima is More Symbolically "Remembered" Than Nagasaki: Differences in Representation Within Literary Works

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Introduction

When I was in elementary school, I visited Nagasaki on a school trip. Even as a child, the brutality of the atomic bombing and the figure of the Peace Statue pointing to the sky left a powerful impression on me. Later, while organizing a relative's belongings during university, I discovered that one of my kinsmen had been bombed in Hiroshima. Records show that his mother carried him on her back from Hiroshima to Fukuoka, nursing him desperately. His burns were so severe that his flesh would sag when he lay down. At that moment, the "atomic bomb" transformed from a mere historical event into an indispensable element of my identity; it was the moment when the "memory" of a hibakusha transcended time and space to be passed down to me.

However, I began to feel a sense of dissonance. Despite both cities suffering equally horrific damage, there is a striking asymmetry in the volume and quality of "memory" circulating in society. In university libraries, books titled Hiroshima: Messages Left on the Wall or The Hiroshima Paradox are too numerous to count. The author Kenzaburo Oe visited Hiroshima in 1963, wrote Hiroshima Notes, and continued to visit. Conversely, Oe did not address Nagasaki, turning his eyes instead to the base issues of Okinawa in Okinawa Notes.

While Hiroshima is symbolized independently, Nagasaki is often mentioned as an appendix in the phrase "Hiroshima and Nagasaki." The primary symbol people recall regarding the bomb is the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima. Why has Hiroshima come to be remembered so much more strongly? Based on this problem, this paper clarifies the disparity in memory through "literary representation," a facet under-explored in previous comparative studies.

Previous research has pointed to political backgrounds where the US and Japanese governments obscured the responsibility for the bombing and covered up radiation damage (Shibata, 2015). Others analyze how the preservation of the Industrial Promotion Hall as the "Atomic Bomb Dome," versus the demolition and reconstruction of Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, defined the cities' memories (Fukuma, 2016). However, this disparity must also stem from the nature of the stories and language set in these locations.

Chapter 1 introduces the disparity in the quantity and quality of "memory." Chapter 2 analyzes Hiroshima’s literature, highlighting the dynamic qualities of "anger," "indictment," and "social change" in Masuji Ibuse’s Black Rain, Oe’s Hiroshima Notes, and Keiji Nakazawa’s Barefoot Gen. Chapter 3 clarifies the static qualities of "prayer" and

"endurance" in Nagasaki, influenced by the Christian background in Takashi Nagai's The Bells of Nagasaki and Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills.

Chapter 1: The Asymmetry of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Before comparing the two, the fact that Hiroshima is more symbolically remembered must be established. Although both cities have national peace memorial halls, there is a large gap in visitor numbers. In 2024, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum recorded a record 2.26 million visitors, including over 720,000 foreigners. Meanwhile, the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum saw about 810,000 visitors. This three-fold difference cannot be explained by geographical factors like proximity to the Kansai region alone.

Furthermore, the "language" used to represent the cities differs. Hiroshima-titled masterpieces abound, while Nagasaki lags in volume. Internationally, the 2023 G7 Hiroshima Summit, attended by world leaders and President Zelenskyy, further reinforced Hiroshima's symbolic dominance. This paper will now examine how this "Hiroshima" archetype was constructed through literary comparison.

Chapter 2: Differences in Literary Representation—Angry Hiroshima

Masuji Ibuse's Black Rain is a cornerstone of atomic bomb literature. It follows Shigematsu Shizuma as he tries to prove his niece Yasuko was not exposed to radiation to secure her a marriage proposal, only for her to develop radiation sickness. Ibuse stated he wrote it as a reportage respecting facts to express anti-war sentiment during the Vietnam War. Crucially, it did not just condemn the US but rejected the abnormal pre-war Japanese system, making it an accessible work for building a post-war consensus.

Kenzaburo Oe entered Hiroshima while struggling with his son's disability. In Hiroshima Notes, he recorded the raw suffering of hibakusha, including the stories of women who gave birth to deformed infants and the overlooked Korean victims. Oe used terms like "humiliation," "recovery," and "dignity" to portray Hiroshima as a proactive symbol of anti-war and peace.

Similarly, Keiji Nakazawa's Barefoot Gen has had a profound impact on war perspectives in Japan. Based on Nakazawa's own experience, it focuses on the brutality of the "Little Boy" bomb. These works reinforce the victim identity through graphic depictions of suffering, but also align the bombing with the "rejection of the old regime," making Hiroshima a platform for social change.

Chapter 3: Differences in Literary Representation—Praying Nagasaki and "Divine Providence"

The occupation-era bestseller The Bells of Nagasaki was written by Takashi Nagai, a Catholic radiologist who lost his wife in the blast. Nagai became a symbol of the "noble sacrifice" of the Japanese people. Historian John Dower notes that Nagai helped Japanese people view themselves as victims of "war itself" rather than participants.

[Photo 1] Takashi Nagai (1908–1951).

Born in Matsue, Shimane Prefecture. He entered Nagasaki Medical College (now Nagasaki University School of Medicine) and, after graduation, engaged in research on radiological physical therapy as an assistant. In 1945, he was diagnosed with leukemia and given only three years to live. On August 9, he was exposed to the atomic bombing at a point 700 meters from the hypocenter. He passed away in 1951.

[Photo 2]Nagai and his two young children

However, Nagai's perspective—describing the bombing as "Divine Providence" and the victims as "sacrifices chosen by God"—effectively blurred the responsibility of the

perpetrator. While this "prayerful" and "enduring" stance was initially accepted, it later faced criticism for being too passive. Furthermore, as a minority religion in Japan, Catholicism was perhaps less suited to becoming a collective national memory compared to Hiroshima's secular "anger."

Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills (1982) offers a different perspective. Set in post-war Nagasaki, it depicts characters like Fujiwara-san, who lost almost her entire family but runs a noodle shop. While she appears resilient, the novel hints at unhealable internal trauma. Unlike the direct political messages of Hiroshima literature, Ishiguro's work focuses on "endurance" and indirect trauma, which, while acclaimed in the UK, did not resonate as a political symbol in Japan.

Ultimately, both cities share a commonality in that the "perpetrator" (the US) is often obscured—initially due to GHQ censorship and later due to Japan's own compromise in acknowledging its path to war.

Conclusion

This paper has examined why Hiroshima became the primary symbol of the atomic bomb through literary representation. The root lies in the pre-bombing character of the cities. Hiroshima was a "Military City," a headquarters for the Imperial Army. Consequently, it was the ideal site to project the political contradictions exposed by defeat. The "Anger" of Hiroshima literature complemented this, whereas the "Prayer" of Nagasaki, rooted in religious providence, remained more localized.

While I had hoped to discuss English-speaking hibakusha like Setsuko Thurlow or Shigeko Sasamori, I must leave that for future research. My own interest was driven by a fragment of memory from my great-grandmother, Shizue Ezaki, who claimed to see the "mushroom cloud" over Nagasaki from Yanagawa, 67 kilometers away. With the average age of hibakusha now over 86, it is my mission to weave these fading voices into the memory of the next generation.

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