

The Island where Future Possibilities Bloom.  
Language, gender, and identity issues in  
Li Kotomi's *Higanbana ga saku shima*

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**Abstract**

Starting from the utopian label given to *The Island where Spider Lilies Bloom* (*Higanbana ga saku shima*, 2021), in this paper I shall analyse the language, gender and identity issues depicted in the novel to explain how they function in the economy of the story and how Li Kotomi uses them to explore the complexity of the individual and the collective. *Higanbana ga saku shima* is set on an anonymous island where the family system is deconstructed and there are no such things as mothers or fathers, and women called “noro” rule the community using a language exclusively for women. However, what at first glance seems to be a utopian society and a story of empowerment turns out to be another example of an exclusive society, where familiar, old tropes are flipped, but fail to create inclusivity. After exploring the societal constructions and clarifying the reasons for this “failure” with reference to the trope of “liminality,” I will take “failure” as a starting point to rethink the concept of utopia and explain how it functions as a basis for moving towards a “not-yet-here” critical utopianism and queer futurism.

Queerness is not yet here but it approaches  
like a crashing wave of potentiality  
– José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2019

**Introductory Remarks**

Literary critics agree that Japan lacks a conspicuous utopian literature tradition, and that the genre was imported during the Meiji period.<sup>1</sup> With a few exceptions, such as Abe Kōbō's *Inter Ice Age 4* (1959), Murakami Haruki's *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) and Inoue Hisashi's *Kirikirijin* (*The People of Kirikiri*, 1986), after World War II utopian literature was replaced by science fiction and hardly appears in contemporary narratives.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, several scholars have argued that the historical events of the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. KOON-KI 1991; NAPIER 1996; MOICHI 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. NAPIER 1996; MOICHI 1999.

century have seen an international decline in utopian literature and a corresponding rise in dystopian literature,<sup>3</sup> and that the “trend seems to have deepened in the first decades of the new millennium.”<sup>4</sup> The same shift can also be observed in Japan, where the contemporary narrative increasingly comprises novels that depict societies in alternative worlds where human beings are doomed by severe discipline or cope with post-disaster issues, such as depopulation or climate change, but that maintain an open ending – the so called “critical dystopias” or “hopeful dystopias.” The surge in such novels has led Saitō Minako to refer to the 2010s as the “Era of Dystopian Novels,”<sup>5</sup> the majority of which, as Ishida notes, should be considered queer, post-disaster novels.<sup>6</sup>

Under these circumstances, it is therefore not surprising that Taiwan-born writer Li Kotomi 李琴峰 (b. 1989) has attracted considerable attention from both Japanese and international critics. Since her debut novel *Solo Dance* (*Hitorimai* 独り舞, 2017), Li has consistently focused on the representation of minorities, as well as the different possibilities of love and the Japanese language. To put it another way: what Li Kotomi conveys in her work is an interconnected tapestry of knowledge that carries trans-feminist and queer ideologies and the experience of a non-native Japanese speaker. Li herself belongs to a minority within a minority – on a very intersectional level, as her identity is the result of the intertwining of ethnicity, language, gender and sexual orientation. Her queerness within normative Japanese society is particularly evident in relation to the reception of her works by Japanese heterosexual, cisgender, male critics, whom Li refers to as *shihe ossan* シへおっさん (short for *shisujendā de heterosekushuaru no ossan*, “cisgender and heterosexual middle-aged men”).<sup>7</sup> Ishihara Chiaki has labelled *Solo Dance* as a “lesbian novel” and declared that he expected more eroticism from such a novel, while an anonymous E has called her *When You Count to Five, the Crescent Moon* (*Itsutsu kazoereba mikazuki ga* 五つ数えれば三日月が, 2019) an “LGBT novel written by a foreigner,” even though LGBT novels written by foreigners don’t exist as a category and thus the claim itself makes no sense.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, Li Kotomi agrees with Matsuura Rieko that one should not give critics the answer they demand, and that Japanese critics tend to obsessively categorise everything.<sup>9</sup> In an interview, she explained that:

Categorisation is a tricky thing. On the one hand, categories are inevitably necessary because we cannot perceive the world without them. But it can also become a kind

<sup>3</sup> Cf. BOOKER 1994; RUSSEL 1999; KUMAR 2013.

<sup>4</sup> VIEIRA 2020: 352.

<sup>5</sup> SAITŌ 2018: 222.

<sup>6</sup> ISHIDA 2023: 43.

<sup>7</sup> LI 2020: 45.

<sup>8</sup> LI 2020: 42-47.

<sup>9</sup> LI 2020: 48-50.

of violence. Categories are only a tool to recognise others and the world, not the essence. [...] The point is not that categories are bad in themselves, but that we need to be aware that the world is more complex and sensitive than the categories we create.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Li's Akutagawa Prize-winning novel *The Island where Spider Lilies Bloom* (*Higanbana ga saku shima* 彼岸花が咲く島, 2021) was positively received by Japanese and international critics, who agree in categorising it as an utopian story. The protagonists of the story can also be labelled queer subjects, but to justify the success of this novel, I would like to borrow the words Nina Ferrante and Samuele Grassi used in their introduction to the Italian edition of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*: "In the times of current dystopia the turning of a horizon of possibility, utopian, is all the more a queer act: rough, reckless."<sup>11</sup>

Starting from the utopian label given to *Higanbana ga saku shima*, in this paper I will analyse the language, gender and identity issues depicted in the novel and explain how they function in the economy of the story and how Li Kotomi uses them to explore the complexity of the individual and the collective. After showing how "liminality" is a key feature within the story, my aim is to demonstrate that, what at a first glance seems to be a utopian society and a story of empowerment, turns out to be another example of an exclusive society, where familiar old tropes are merely flipped and fail to create inclusivity – revealing its anti-utopian sides and showing us how tricky the categorisation of this novel can be. I will then take this society's "failure" as a starting point to rethink the concept of utopia. Referring to José Esteban Muñoz's concepts, I shall argue that the failure, the negative, functions as a basis for move towards a "not-yet-here" critical utopianism and queer futurism. These features prompt an open ending, allowing the novel to align itself with the canon of contemporary critical dystopias that are successful today.

## 1 The Quasi-utopic Island

The plot of *Higanbana ga saku shima* is quite simple: in an undefined future, a girl with no memory is found by Yona on an island's beach, surrounded by *higanbana* (spider lilies). Yona, convinced that the girl has arrived from Nirai Kanai, the paradise she and the other islanders believe in, brings her home and gives her the name "Umi." She then introduces Umi to her parent Sera, her male friend Tatsu, and to the community of the island, which as far as Yona and the other inhabitants know, is the only place on Earth – they just call it "Island." Even though Island can't be defined as a nation-state, it is governed by women called *noro*, shamans of a sort who also take care of the whole community. The *noro* regulate Island's

<sup>10</sup> Li and INOUE/NONAKA 2022.

<sup>11</sup> FERRANTE/GRASSI 2022: v.

time and life through rituals, distribute necessary goods to the population, determine where people will live, and, most importantly, are the only ones who handle the rituals and history of Island. They do so thanks to their mastery of *jogo* 女語, “Women’s Language,” a language that only women can learn and only *noro* are fluent in – which is contemporary Japanese. The *noro* are revered by the population as deities, and at the top of their hierarchical ladder stands the Great Noro, the one with the most experience and the best command of Women’s Language.

People on Island speak a language called NIHONGO ニホン語, which, even as it recalls the Japanese word for the Japanese language itself, is written in *katakana* and is a mixture of Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese and Ryūkyūan, invented by Li Kotomi. Umi speaks a third language called *Hi no moto kotoba* ひのもとことば, the “Words of the Rising Sun,” a sort of contemporary Japanese intermingled with English words, but without vocabulary of Chinese origin (*kango*) and without Chinese characters (*kanji*) in writing. Therefore, Yona and Umi cannot communicate at first, but thanks to their male friend Tatsu, who for some unknown reason has mastered Women’s Language, they soon become close and Umi starts her life on Island. The story revolves around Umi’s quest for her place on Island, and can also be read as a *bildungsroman*, with her eventually discovering her past and the history of Island, albeit still questioning herself about her right to live there.

Although international studies on utopia and dystopia are abundant, they predominantly focus on Euro-American works, frequently overlooking Japanese-language works, except those categorised as “cyberpunk,” a genre heavily influenced by utopian and dystopian tropes. Therefore, my analysis will primarily, but not exclusively, engage with Susan Napier’s research. Napier observes that Japanese-language utopian works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century share a “consistent emphasis on movement and fluidity,” and that they are “surrounded by the imagery of death.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, tracing back to the traditional meaning carried by the term “utopia,” she recalls that the “better places” drawn in those novels valorise “history as a means to increase community connections and to develop a sense of identity,” and provide a “nostalgic, rural ‘hometown’ which offers comfort, connection and escape,”<sup>13</sup> and that protagonists are “animated by a desire or a search for a lost *Heimat*.”<sup>14</sup>

## The Movements

Li Kotomi’s novel too is filled with movement and fluidity. In particular it is possible to identify four kinds of movement: 1) the journey(s); 2) the positions of the moon and the sun that mark the daytime and weather conditions; 3) the season’s changing, characterised by

<sup>12</sup> NAPIER 1996: 165-167.

<sup>13</sup> NAPIER 1996: 174.

<sup>14</sup> NAPIER 1996: 181.

rituals and events; and 4) the metaphorical movement between languages. All these movements are intertwined in the rural world of Island. The opening scene, in which Umi is lying on the beach with her tattered white dress, unmistakably alludes to her having been washed up on the beach by the tide, and later in the story we learn, thanks to the flashbacks that incessantly assail her, that her journey was not undertaken willingly, but out of obligation. She sees a storm and waves, and remembers that in the place from where she came, people lived in rectangular boxes divided into units called families; she also remembers that everything was white and seemed clean and sterile, and that times of the day were determined by a precise instrument that made people tense and nervous, as if constantly searching for time.<sup>15</sup>

These flashbacks suggest that Umi arrived on Island after a shipwreck, and we learn that her place of origin, whose description is reminiscent of an aseptic, static and hostile place, like many cities in dystopias, is completely different from Island. The technology which measures time with extreme precision, symbol of the “technological nightmare”<sup>16</sup> typical of dystopian imagery, does not exist in the rural community of Island, where the time of day is determined by the sun’s angle, and the day of the Women’s Language lesson by the moon – we learn that women attend lessons once a month, on the night of the full moon.

On Island, there is no such thing as a family unit, and people live in houses assigned by the *noro* as they become adults, and can choose to live alone or in couples, regardless of their biological sex or sexual orientation, although this aspect is not made explicit. Children are raised as “children of Island,” even if they are first placed in the care of the *noro*, and then assigned to one or more parent(s) (*oya* 親 in Japanese).

### **Longing for an *ibasho*, not a *Heimat***

Everything on Island happens under the *noro*’s supervision, and Umi soon discovers that what at first might appear to be an inclusive community is a self-enclosed matriarchal society characterised by power asymmetries. It is undeniable that there are no power hierarchies among the people across the three villages of Island themselves, and that from a gender role perspective there are no differences, as evidenced by the job division – Sera, Yona’s female parent, is a fisherfolk, a role traditionally ascribed to a male. Nevertheless, the entire community and the rhythms by which it functions are governed by the *noro*’s will: the *noro* decide when to celebrate rituals, to whom to give which house or goods for living, and who can become a *noro*. They are the only ones allowed to travel overseas by ship, to what islanders consider an earthly paradise, Nirai Kanai, from which the *noro* return venerated as

<sup>15</sup> Li 2021: 52-53. All translations are, if not otherwise indicated, by the author, and the linguistic choices are based on those of my Italian translation of the novel.

<sup>16</sup> NAPIER 1996: 184.

gods, with goods (many of which represent technologies, such as automobiles). The islanders genuinely venerate the *norō*, whose identity is mythological in scope and adhere to the apparatus they create.

Rituals and festivals regulate the rhythm of islanders' lives and serve as a social glue. The entire community takes part in organising these events, from the initial offerings to the set-up and on to the final dances. These are moments of cohesion in which individual selves seem to merge into a collective self, always rural, capable of offering comfort. Yet, when Umi attends the Machili's closing festival, she fails to feel the familiarity and belonging that a utopian society should offer:

The island had words, customs and traditions that were foreign to her, but to Yona and Tatsu it was home. Watching them dance she felt confronted by her insignificance. Who was she, who did not even have a past?<sup>17</sup>

Island is anything but nostalgic to Umi: on her journey, Umi stumbles upon an event that interrupts her new daily routine by showing her that she is missing something. What Umi is looking for is not the *Heimat* noted by Napier, but can be expressed by the Japanese word *ibasho* 居場所, a place to belong. But, again, the *norō*'s policies seem to be extremely firm and exclusive: just as a man cannot access Women's Language and become a history-maker, neither can a foreigner stay and live on Island.

Umi learns this truth when she is introduced to the Great Noro, who urges her to leave Island. The Great Noro's seemingly adamant decision falters, however, when Yona and Sera point out that Umi has nowhere to return to and that embarking in winter could be dangerous because of storms and rough seas. Umi is therefore granted special permission: if she learns Women's Language by spring and manages to pass the exam to become a *norō*, she can stay on Island. As a result, for Umi, the sentence of exile turns into its opposite: knowing Women's Language and becoming a *norō* implicitly means having access to the history of Island and become a history-maker. Rather than leave Island, she must become part of Island (and gain a new identity), and will never be able to leave it again.

### Language and Gender Trouble

From this moment in the story, Umi embarks on a new journey that unfolds through her back-and-forth between languages. Up to this point Umi, and with her the reader, feels more bewilderment than identification, but learning NIHONGO and Women's Language allows her to gradually reconcile herself with the community. She un-learns the language she knows, connected to the history of her past, and she learns two new languages, related to the

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<sup>17</sup> Li 2021: 51.

history of her (momentary) present. Li Kotomi's use of language in this novel is peculiar: in the creation of NIHONGO, Li disrupts the norms of the Japanese language and mixes into it the lexis, reading of the characters, and sometimes syntax from the Chinese and Taiwanese languages and the Ryūkyūan dialect – using Japanese “rubi” for the readers' comprehension. Umi's stumbling progress in learning in NIHONGO is counterbalanced by the more regular or fluent path of her learning of Women's Language, which is so like her Words of the Rising Sun, apart from some lexis.

As Umi learns both indigenous languages, she cannot help but ask herself why, in such a gender role free society, there exists a gendered language related to the gendered role of the *norō*. Tatsu serves to highlight this disturbance. Tatsu venerates the *norō* and would love to become one, and by questioning the reason for this asymmetry, he forces us to stop, to discuss, and to rethink societal constructions. Why is it that a man born and raised on Island cannot become a *norō*, learn their language, and become a history-maker? Tatsu himself, as a character, is created to deconstruct the social constructions of Island. The name Tatsu, in Japanese, can be both female and male: in the novel is written with the *kanji* of “opening up” or “paving the way,” and “mercy” or “affection,” 拓慈, alluding to the character's desire of inclusion.<sup>18</sup> As the reader soon learns, Women's Language does not substantially differ from present-day Japanese, but as it is mastered only by women, the use of the first-person pronoun *watashi* 私 becomes automatic and exclusive. Consequently, when Tatsu speaks in Women's Language, he doesn't use male first-person pronouns one would find in Japanese, such as *ore* 俺 or *boku* 僕, but refers to himself as *watashi*. Moreover, although Tatsu is depicted as male, in the private sphere, his gender performance is feminine: not only does he speak Women's Language with greater skill than Umi and Yona, but he also draws images similar to *norō* tattoos on his hands. Therefore, his actions and words can be perceived as gender non-conforming, or queer. Simultaneously, Tatsu's desire to learn the Women's Language and become a *norō* can be read as the inversion of women's and other minority subjects' attempts to enter various realms of contemporary society that are closed to them. However, Tatsu, who only limits his deviant behaviour to private spaces while adhering to Island's norms in public, does not take action, nor propose solutions, for change (though he does deem the Island's politics unfair). His passivity is anti-performative, and, moreover, seems to belong to the realm of the mere pragmatic: Tatsu is moved solely by a desire for personal integration into an exclusive community and while he may come to represent a “minority,” an ideology or manifesto are missing from the base of his claim for equality.

Nevertheless, an awareness of social inequality begins to glimmer in Umi when the Great Noro gives her the chance to become a *norō* and she learns Women's Language in its written form. When Tatsu discovers that Umi could become a *norō*, despite being a foreigner,

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<sup>18</sup> The reading Tatsu for this name is given in *rubi*.

simply by virtue of being a woman, he is upset; and as Umi learns Women's Language in its written form, she starts reflecting on the unequal system of Island.

Umi does not understand the characters used in Women's language, as her Words of the Rising Sun have a written form that does not contain them. Throughout the narrative, Li never refers to the characters in Women's Language or NIHONGO as "Chinese characters," only as strange, very thick, square strokes. Umi's unfamiliarity with these forms of writing, and her progressive approach to them, is an explorative travel through invented, experimental expressions and words, often interpretable with excesses or defects of meaning. The reader, following Umi's progress, and gradually deciphering the linguistic clues scattered throughout the story, meditates on his or her own identity and the intimate relationship between language, history and identity.

## 2 The Dystopic Truth

What seems to be the perfect Shangri La, the society on Island, ultimately turns out to be a community in which, while the norms governing family systems, blood ties and compulsory hetero-cisgender romances do not apply, population control is stricter than it appears. Moreover, gender dynamics are simply reversed from those of a patriarchal society and demonstrate similar flaws – except for violence, the absence of which emphasises the fact that inequality exists even when violence is not explicit. Indeed, there is a female monopoly on all spheres and men are at a disadvantage, often in charge of more domestic roles – Shunka takes care of the goods (cooked food) for the rites, while Tatsu would be a slaughterer, a role that is also related to food consumption. Men can become parents, like their female counterparts, but only from the time the "children of Island" turn three, because the care of infants is the *noro's* prerogative – therefore, women's. Collective care occurs only later. Likewise, men cannot access Women's Language, representative of higher education that allows them to acquire more (and fundamental) knowledge.

Similar situations can be found in numerous anti-utopian and/or dystopian novels.<sup>19</sup> Among the features that *Higanbana ga saku shima* shares with these narratives, there is also the representation of history, frequently seen as "something to be scaped."<sup>20</sup> Within *Higanbana ga saku shima*, the construction of the matriarchal society derives from, depends on, and is bound to the Island's history, and the *noro's* decision to exclusively possess it.

<sup>19</sup> Kōnosu lists several novels with which *Higanbana* shares similarities. See: KŌNOSU 2021a: 155.

<sup>20</sup> NAPIER 1996: 181.



## Hidden History

Umi and Yona innocently (and ignorantly) promised Tatsu that they would continue to teach him Women's Language and secretly introduce him to the history of Island, in the name of their friendship. Yet the moment that they, after passing the exam to become a *noro*, learn about the history and truth of Island, they experience a profound jolt and are led to rethink both their promise and the plausibility of inclusion. The Great *Noro*, in fact, explains to them that Nirai Kanai does not exist, and that Island is not the only land on Earth.

She tells them that on Earth there are several countries constantly at war, and that the current population of Island is made up of the descendants of the refugees who came from a northern country once called JAPAN (now *Hi no moto guni*, "Land of the Rising Sun") and a western country called TAIWAN, invaded by CHINA. In JAPAN, a pandemic decimated the population, with men at the head of society believing that the pandemic had come from abroad. In a fit of xenophobia, these men decided to carry out a proper "social cleansing" by banning all "non-purely" Japanese people from the country after screening every individual to verify their "racial purity." Together with the foreigners, those considered "impure" from a hetero-cisgender perspective were also expelled. Victims of the racial and sexual cleansing of the government were loaded onto unstable ships and sent out to sea.

Those victims of discrimination and exile, upon arriving on Island, instead of immediately creating a new and inclusive society, exterminated the existing population and colonised the entire territory. When new boatloads of refugees later arrived from TAIWAN, internal conflicts multiplied until men decided to step aside and leave "history" in the hands of women – even though no further explanation is given for this sharp decision. The final battle, the one during which men became aware of their misdeeds, took place on the beach surrounded by *higanbana* where Umi was found unconscious. As women became the only history-makers, they banished men from history and took full control of Island, in all its aspects. According to Kōnosu, the fact that the men are not driven out or killed and removed but realise their mistakes on their own and voluntarily withdraw from history, is what differentiates this novel from the other previous feminist dystopian novels (2021a: 156). However, as I mentioned above, the absence of violence or wars doesn't prevent the *noro* from creating a hierarchical and unequal society.

Umi and Yona ultimately discover that the *noro* are nothing more than women devoid of any divine power who go to nearby TAIWAN to sell huge quantities of *higanbana*, shipped as an opium-like commodity. In other words, to the outside world, the *noro* are drug dealers. They only perform the role of guardians and gods, to keep Island isolated from the rest of the countries and to prevent internal conflicts: they hide the twofold nature of *higanbana* (on Island, *higanbana* are used solely for therapeutic purposes), archive the past as something not to be repeated, and hide history and treat it as something to escape from – just as happens in an anti-utopian novel. In fact, while the *noro* are undoubtedly driven by

good intentions, what results is indeed a policy of exclusion and censorship – “we must never allow that history repeats itself”<sup>21</sup> they say to justify their actions.

As violent politics (caused by men as history-makers, or, broadly speaking, by the patriarchy) still exist in other countries, it can therefore be argued that Island is surrounded by death, the last feature of utopias.<sup>22</sup> On the narrative level, the entire explanation of the history of Island is entrusted to the Great Noro’s monologue, and is perhaps slightly hasty in its sudden revealing of the mystery that, sprinkled throughout the story, has held the reader’s interest through the novel. Among the scattered clues, the meaning of the white colour of the *noro*’s clothes, as opposed to the red of the *higanbana*, is now clear to the reader. White is traditionally associated with innocence, purity and goodness, and in Japan it also symbolises cleanliness and godliness, or mourning.

At the same time, white is the colour of the place in Umi’s flashbacks, that is, JAPAN. The *noro*’s white dresses could then represent both their goodness on Island and their proximity with the outside world, full of death. The white colour is also juxtaposed with the red colour of *higanbana*. These flowers, possessing the two ambivalent functions of opiates and palliatives,<sup>23</sup> are in fact linked to death. The Japanese name *higanbana* translates as “flower of the other shore,” which refers to the Buddhist belief that the land of death stands on the opposite shore of the Sanzu River, and also relates to the arrival of the autumn equinox. Within the novel, *higanbana* thrive especially near the cave where the bodies of the dead are deposited, and on the beach where Umi arrived. These are, in essence, flowers that convey a sense of “liminality” in its traditional sense: a threshold in space or time.

### Words of Power/Power of Words

When the Great Noro reveals Island’s history to Yona and Umi, the two girls feel disappointment and experience a new form of bewilderment. Yona loses the compass by which she had oriented herself up to that point, while Umi, who seemed to have just found her own *ibasho*, understands that she never had a place to return to, that she had been expelled from her *Heimat* because of the racial, sexual, and linguistic purification policies enforced in JAPAN. This explains why Umi can broadly understand Women’s Language: it is the language formerly spoken in JAPAN.<sup>24</sup>

To the reader, the difference is evident from the earliest dialogues, thanks to the graphic representation that distinguishes the two languages: Words of the Rising Sun is

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<sup>21</sup> LI 2021: 153.

<sup>22</sup> NAPIER 1996: 167.

<sup>23</sup> Kōnosu states that, *higanbana*’s dual nature symbolises Island itself with its dark sides (KŌNOSU 2021a: 156).

<sup>24</sup> LI 2021: 151-152.

rendered in *hiragana*, while Women’s Language is for all intents and purposes contemporary Japanese devoid of first-person male pronouns. Umi speaks a language that, as the readers see through the dialogues, is “cleansed” according to the Statute of the Land of the Rising Sun. For Umi, Words of Rising Sun is the mother tongue learned in a country that, although it supposedly gave her life, rejected her, denying her the chance to feel any sense of belonging. Her journey, or path of growth and re-belonging, to a new identity reflects in how she increasingly expresses herself in Women’s Language – although her learning Women’s Language is more a necessity than a voluntary choice.

Yona finds herself forced to re-read and reinterpret the map of her past. NIHONGO, the mother tongue that she inevitably associates with her belonging to Island and which she has always considered a monolith, turns out to be a creole language born from the Island’s past.

Women, after inheriting history, first decided to stop conflicts. Taking command, they arranged for people who fled JAPAN to settle in Higashi village and those who fled TAIWAN to Xī and Nán villages. [...] The result of linguistic contamination is the language spoken on Island today, NIHONGO.<sup>25</sup>

As can be seen from this passage, the three villages of Island are also influenced by their languages of origin, as they take the names of the cardinal points in Japanese (Higashi 東, east) and Chinese (Nán 南, south and Xī 西, west) respectively. NIHONGO as a creole language, for which Chinese and Taiwanese are the lexifiers, is written in *katakana* in the novel, distancing itself from the *nihongo* written in *kanji* that identifies contemporary Japanese (日本語). NIHONGO is an experimental language that Li Kotomi creates to test the possibilities of the Japanese language, but is far from the Japanese language.<sup>26</sup> In her review of *Higanbana ga saku shima*, Glynne Walley states, with reference to the linguistic issues, that:

The preservation of modern Japanese as Jogo is also a provocative element, if we’re to see the island as a refuge from a dystopian China and Japan. The noro’s efforts to preserve it (there’s no mention of them doing anything similar with Chinese) suggest they see it as a part of a valuable heritage from the vanished world. And yet it’s the exclusive property of the noro. [...] They keep the history of patriarchal societies secret from the rest of the islanders – particularly the men – precisely so they won’t get any ideas about questioning the matriarchy. Japanese is kept secret in just the same way, suggesting that it’s a hopelessly patriarchal thing that belongs to the women of the island only as something they need to keep under lock and key.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Li 2021: 152.

<sup>26</sup> Hayashi Hifumi states that the path to be taken towards the formation of NIHONGO and Words of the Rising Sun had already been suggested in Li’s previous novels. Cf. HAYASHI 2022: 137.

<sup>27</sup> WALLEY 2021. Emphasis of the author.

The preservation of Japanese as Women’s Language is certainly provocative, but if it were seen as a patriarchal thing, then why did the *noro* choose it over Chinese? Maybe, as refugees from JAPAN represented the majority (even though refugees from TAIWAN settled in two villages while those from JAPAN settled in one, the village of Higashi is the biggest and most populated), women just decided to keep the language of the majority to create for themselves a sense of belonging to the majority. This interpretation points to the controversial issue that the majority is associated with power, a misunderstanding that, when internalised, triggers imitation mechanisms – just as happens in contemporary society, where social constructions enable and reproduce male dominance over women, and some empowered women behave in a “manly” way. It is for this reason that, in the introduction, I wrote that “familiar old tropes are merely flipped, and fail to create inclusivity.” At the same time, Yona’s difficulty in learning Women’s Language could be interpreted as her difficulty in perceiving herself as part of a majority, as she strongly believes in community and equality – she welcomed Umi without question, and she promised Tatsu to teach him Island’s secrets.

### 3 The Island where Future Possibilities Bloom

Taking Thomas Moore’s novel as the model of Utopia, The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it as “an imaginary place or state in which everything is perfect.”<sup>28</sup> Essentially, the novel meets the characteristics of the utopian tradition,<sup>29</sup> but Island’s society cannot be called utopian *per se*, if by “utopian” we mean the ideal place where everything is perfect. Although the *noro*’s intent is that of safeguarding Island and its inhabitants, what results is a matriarchal regime. On Island there is no place for minorities: Tatsu, as a man who knows Women’s Language, cannot expose himself in public; Umi, as a foreigner, must choose between exile or a future as a *noro*. Forasmuch as the *noro* refuse to change their policies, Tatsu and Umi cannot find their *ibasho*. Island functions rather as an anti-utopia, cautioning readers about the potential dangers of a utopian experiment. In this sense, the *noro*’s policies of negation and exclusion cannot be described as anything but a failure. Li herself claims that Island is not an ideal society, precisely because of the dark side it hides, and states the following:

At first, I wanted to write a utopia, but when I thought about it, I realised that utopia may not exist. To begin with, the etymology of the word utopia itself is “a place that cannot exist.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/utopia> (accessed: 08.02.2024).

<sup>29</sup> KŌNOSU 2021a.

<sup>30</sup> Li in CHENG 2019.

Li seemingly refers to Thomas Moore's formulation, considering Utopia a fictional island of ideal perfection. The fictional nature of *Higanbana ga saku shima*'s society is axiomatic as it is set on an island with no name, a proper οὐ- τόπος (not-place).

Li, perpetuating the linguistic experiment that characterises the entire narrative and with which she cleverly plays at creating the non-existent, could have named the island "Yonaguni" by writing it in *katakana*, just as she did with the other fictitious references that appear in the novel, such as JAPAN (ニホン), CHINA (チュウゴク), and TAIWAN (タイワン).<sup>31</sup> The references to the Okinawan island of Yonaguni are clear, and the author also visited the island to gather the necessary material to write the novel.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the island is called Island by its inhabitants by virtue of the *noro*'s deception, who forbid them to know the outside world, convincing them that Island is the only existing mainland, a strategy of surveillance that serves to reinforce the ambivalent nature of Island's society – as perfect as it is hermetic.

### The "in betweenness" of Identities

Among the several features shared by modern Japanese utopian novels, Napier lists also the "valorization of liminality."<sup>33</sup> Liminality is an old trope: in *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep illustrates it within the second phase of his three-phases model consisting of separation, transition and incorporation. Drawing upon his discourse, the anthropologist Victor Turner states that, in the first phase, there "should be in addition a rite which changes the quality of *time* also, or construct a cultural realm which is defined 'out of time,' that is, beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines;"<sup>34</sup> he argues that the term *limen* used by Van Gennep in the second phase "appears to be negative in connotation, since it is no longer the positive past condition nor yet the positive articulated future condition."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Turner identifies the transition phase, the liminal one, as an ambiguous, negative one which challenges our identities, as it represents an intermediate state of being between the "no longer" and the "not yet." In this phase, individuals have lost their former identity and are struggling to gain a new one. Referring to *Higanbana ga saku shima*, I argue that the novel develops around the stages identified by Van Gennep, the first being represented by Umi's disengagement with her past, the second by Umi's trying to fit in with

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<sup>31</sup> The solution of employing *katakana* in place of *kanji* to distinguish physical places from historical and geographically located ones was also adopted for the cities of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima following radioactive contamination. In this paper, the contrivance is dictated by the need to emphasise the fictional character of the places in contrast to the real ones.

<sup>32</sup> CHENG 2019.

<sup>33</sup> NAPIER 1996: 165.

<sup>34</sup> TURNER 1974: 57.

<sup>35</sup> TURNER 1974: 72.

her new reality and the third by Umi's becoming a *noro*. It is in this sense that, as mentioned in the introduction, I consider *Higanbana ga saku shima* a *bildungsroman*, depicting Umi's travel to find her identity.

When I mentioned that *higanbana* flowers can be interpreted as a symbol of liminality, I used the term in its more conventional meaning of threshold. Nevertheless, as the title of the novel suggests, since the setting is "the island where *higanbana* bloom," *higanbana* are ubiquitous, and due to the absence of a full integration of the protagonists at the end, I consider Island itself as an example of "liminality." In fact, under the *noro's* government, Tatsu is not fully engaged in his desired role, Yona is ultimately disappointed, and Umi is forced into a role that she did not choose.

Dianna C. Lacy shows that liminality is a recurring trope in works of speculative fiction and is frequently associated with the concept of time – the additional rite that, according to Turner, should be added to Van Gennep's model. Lacy takes into consideration memory as an example of liminal time, as it "exists both outside and inside the timeline, and when presented in literature the memory often becomes the story. [...] The moment is not a part of the character's now, but it has worked to shape that now."<sup>36</sup> Lacy's statement can be applied to Li's novel too, where liminality is engaged with Umi's memory. Referring to Muñoz, who states that the past is performative and acts on the present (1999: 36), if we consider Umi's flashbacks as examples of a memory which moves into her present, thereby creating a new "rite which changes the quality of time," the result is Turner's "out of time" realm. Within this realm, in which Umi is neither the person she was in her native place, nor a fully-integrated islander, Umi is initiated to Island's ceremonies and rites – all elements belonging to Van Gennep's second phase. Her flashbacks interrupt the straight timeline of the narrative, creating a new flow (which can be added to the list of movements in the story), and acting on Umi's present, thereby rendering the time circular and creating a sense of liminality.

Later in the novel, the Great Noro reveals that she herself came from the same country as Umi, and was also a shipwreck survivor. Her initial choice to expel Umi from Island stems from her fear that men from the Land of the Rising Sun might embark to Island to colonise it or, in the worst though most plausible scenario, exterminate the entire population – after all, the inhabitants of Island are the descendants of those that JAPAN hunted down, driven by xenophobia and/or feeling threatened by their "diversity" or "impurity."

The Great Noro's gaze is always turned to the past, to the "no longer." Even her final decision to include Umi, rather than stemming from a sudden glimpse into the possibilities of the future, seems to stem from reflections on the past. The Great Noro is described as a very old woman, one of whose eyes is white, dull and cloudy: the good eye, that with which she controls Umi, can be therefore interpreted as her past-oriented gaze, and the white eye

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<sup>36</sup> LACY 2019: 4-5.

represents her blindness regarding the future. Her inclusion of Umi is not for the good of society. The Great Noro accepts Umi as a *noro*, but she does not change her mind about allowing men (and women who do not become *noro*) access to history. In other words, the Great Noro, nailed to her fears of the past, decides to maintain societal asymmetries, and keep the islanders in their liminal state.

### Failure as a Source for Queer Utopianism

The Great Noro and the *noro*'s policy of hiding the truth by keeping the islanders in a liminal phase is the reason why Island's society cannot be defined as utopian *per se*. Although Island's society meets most of the criteria of Utopia, it is not inclusive in its broader sense and can be considered a failure, as it generates feelings of frustration and unhappiness in its inhabitants. In other words, the island is a utopia for some of the women, but it also has the conditions to become a dystopia especially for men.<sup>37</sup> The *noro* disregard inclusion, they disregard complexity; they miss the minoritarian, the queer. However, their society is not merciless, as it happens in other feminist utopias (or dystopias), since reading the works it is possible to note that it is "underpinned by a spirit of tolerance and altruism."<sup>38</sup> But *noro*'s vision of utopia is partial, confined to their present, and lacks a global mindset. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the *noro*'s failure is the starting point for a certain queer utopianism. Muñoz gives his definition of queerness:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. [...] We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. [...] Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.<sup>39</sup>

From this perspective, it is evident that queerness, the queer, is "not-yet-here," but is projected on a future horizon of possibilities that is full of hope; or, to draw a parallel with another kind of "not yet," it is the ideal third phase in Van Gennep's scheme, which provides a new sense of incorporation. Queerness as a "not-yet-here," rejecting the liminal phase of "here and now," suggests that the present lacks something, precisely hope.

Muñoz's analysis is based on his experience as a Cuban person immigrating to the USA (that is, as a minority), and in his book, he explores the places where contact between outsiders in New York and Los Angeles occurs, analysing literary, poetic and artistic works. I

<sup>37</sup> KŌNOSU 2021a: 155.

<sup>38</sup> KŌNOSU 2021a: 157.

<sup>39</sup> MUÑOZ 2019: 1.

apply the concepts he expresses to Li Kotomi's novel, as they are universal, forasmuch as there is a failure in the present and a hope for the future. In relation to hope, Muñoz makes references to Ernst Bloch and the concept of Utopia he expounds, which goes beyond Thomas Moore's formulation. Bloch, writes Muñoz, "makes a critical distinction between abstract utopias and concrete utopias," and states that the first "are untethered from any historical consciousness" and "are akin to banal optimism," while the second are "the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated people."<sup>40</sup> Bloch states that concrete utopia is the expression of educated hope, and that "hope must be unconditionally disappointable [...]: hope holds *eo ipso* the condition of defeat," because it is different from confidence and, surrounded by dangers, it is marked by indeterminacy.<sup>41</sup> Muñoz further explains that "hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory," a "not-yet-conscious" that "is knowable, to some extent, as a utopian feeling."<sup>42</sup>

Keeping in mind Bloch's considerations as reported by Muñoz, we can reinterpret the society constructed by the *noro* as an abstract utopia. The *noro* trap the islanders in a state of liminality, between the "no longer," the past they hide, and a "not-yet-here", the "real utopia" towards which the *noro* do not look. There are, however, two disturbing elements in this scenario: Umi and Yona. Umi interrupts the linearity of time conceived by the *noro* through her flashbacks. She projects into the present the fear of the past repeating itself. Yona, on the other hand, is disillusioned by learned truths. But the two girls represent the possibility of the concrete utopia Bloch refers to, the realisation of a better future.

Yona is characterised from the beginning as an unprejudiced and inclusive character. The moment she learns of Island's past and the *noro*'s truth, her doubts arise: to reveal the history to Tatsu, and then to all the other men, or not? To keep the promise or not? To answer her own doubts, Yona makes a different use of the past than do the *noro*. Instead of archiving it, she considers the past as a "field of possibilities in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity."<sup>43</sup> In other words, she rejects the "here and now" point of view and takes her liminal state of being as a potentiality. Island's history and Umi's flashbacks have their own agency and act on Yona by making her use them to rethink the future. Her timeline is not linear, not rooted in the past. She is not confident, she of course perceives the danger, nevertheless she hopes. Furthermore, her idea of future is queer in the sense that it contemplates any kind of inclusion. She is an agent in the present for the future of the community, she represents the "the solitary oddball who is the one who

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<sup>40</sup> MUÑOZ 2019: 3.

<sup>41</sup> BLOCH 1998: 340-341.

<sup>42</sup> MUÑOZ 2019: 3.

<sup>43</sup> MUÑOZ 2019: 16.



dreams for many.” This is evident in the last scene of the novel, where Umi and Yona are seated on the beach and watch the sunset, speaking in Women’s Language:

“Do you think we should teach Tatsu Women’s Language?”

“Yeah. And I also think we should allow the men to become *noro*,” Yona said. “We all live on Island, to exclude only men would be biased.”

Umi heaved a sigh and smiled bitterly. “I’ve always admired your candour, Yona,” she said.

“Well, Tatsu used to laugh at me as a child for being too simple-minded,” Yona replied with a shy smile, scratching her head.

[...]

“When men too become *noro*, Women’s Language will no longer be Women’s.”

“When the time comes, we’ll change its name.”

“And what if men resume history, and persecute women and children as they did in the past?”

“When the time comes, we’ll think about it.”

“And what if the Land of the Rising Sun were to seize Island?”

“When the time comes, we’ll think about it.”<sup>44</sup>

In Japanese (and in Women’s Language) plurals do not exist. What I have translated as “when the time comes... we’ll change...” or “when the time comes... we’ll think” is rendered in the original with the forms *その時は...変えればいい* and *その時は...考えればいい*, which don’t refer to a particular subject, and can be used in either the singular or plural. However, given the context, Yona does not refer to herself; she is not the subject of the sentence, but she invokes a plural that can change and think. This plural does not refer only to her and Umi: Yona calls for collective action. Men like Tatsu will no longer be a minority but could rather represent a non-toxic masculinity that stands apart from the past, from warmongering and bloodthirsty masculinity. In the last scene, Yona reveals to Umi her first idea for the near future: the two of them will live together with Tatsu and perhaps raise a child, create a queer family, and work for the community.

Maybe Yona is not fully aware of the meaning of her using the implicit “we,” but it is possible to argue that it incarnates the “not-yet-conscious” and Muñoz’s “utopian feeling.”

#### 4 Conclusions

Although critics have classified the novel as utopian, *Higanbana ga saku shima* is not utopian *per se*. It undoubtedly contains elements ascribable to the utopian tradition, in particular to the critical utopia as postulated by Moylan.<sup>45</sup> However, the *noro* fail to surmount the barriers

<sup>44</sup> Li 2021: 187. The translation choices coincide with the Italian translation of the novel.

<sup>45</sup> MOYLAN 2000.

erected by xenophobia and queerphobia.<sup>46</sup> Granted that there is no direct mention of queer people, there exists at least the hope that in Yona's imagined future they will be part of the project – thus, we can consider Yona's as a planned utopia.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Yona is thinking about a family made up of three, breaking the tension that permeates the narrative, that alludes to a romantic relationship between her and Umi. Their closeness winks at the possibility of Yona and Umi forming a lesbian couple, as suggested also by the name of the *higanbana* in NIHONGO, where they are called *bianbanah*, including the “bian” that in Japanese refers to lesbians. This hypothesis is enforced by Umi's flashbacks, through which the reader understands that her expulsion from the Land of the Rising Sun is due to her being a lesbian, as she is obsessed with the flashback of a woman's lips.

Li Kotomi wrote the novel between 2019 and 2020, and finished it by 2021, the year it was published. In interviews she declares that she travelled into the Okinawan region to study local customs and geography, and to “map out how the juxtaposition of boundary and diversity influences a person's identity,”<sup>48</sup> and the books she read are listed at the end of the novel. But the same period also coincided with the spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent pandemic, which led some countries to take controversial countermeasures. Li explains that, while in Japan the same politics were applied to all residents, in Taiwan, governmental policies differed for those of different nationalities.<sup>49</sup> Japan restricted the entry of non-Japanese and non-residents, exacerbating “pre-existing xenophobic sentiment.”<sup>50</sup> It is not surprising then, that this would have influenced Li's decision to set her story in a post-pandemic and xenophobic future where Japan changes its name to the Land of the Rising Sun – which sounds more nationalistic, and is more reminiscent of the country's past – and its language to the Words of the Rising Sun. The choice not to set stories in the present in order to avoid direct references to contemporary problems is a common denominator in utopian and dystopian literature.

As written in the introduction, Japanese critics appreciated the experiment, with some categorising the novel as utopian or “feminist-utopian,”<sup>51</sup> others as an example of literature written in Japanese which “might indicate the development of postmodernism in the history of expression in new Japanese literature,”<sup>52</sup> but the majority did not even mention it as “post-Covid literature.” According to Kurata Yōko, Li Kotomi depicted “a matriarchal island

<sup>46</sup> The author herself admits that *Island* is not inclusive for transgender people. LI in TAKEDA 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Koon-ki refers to planned utopia as “utopias achieved or intended to be achieved by plans and/or political reforms”. KOON-KI 1991: 201.

<sup>48</sup> NOJIMA 2021.

<sup>49</sup> ENDŌ 2021.

<sup>50</sup> WILSON 2022.

<sup>51</sup> KŌNOSU 2021a. KŌNOSU 2021b.

<sup>52</sup> ISHIDA 2023: 42.

while preaching and naturalizing both nationalism and heterocentrism,”<sup>53</sup> while Takahashi Gen’ichirō and Saitō Minako talk about “Corona novels,” without touching Li’s work.<sup>54</sup>

The novel *Higanbana ga saku shima* challenges “the violence of categorization”<sup>55</sup> through its portrayal of linguistic fragmentation, identity formation, gender representation, and policy issues. *Higanbana ga saku shima* is certainly a novel that challenges categories: this is evident starting from the construction of the story, which, while incorporating some tropes of feminist utopias developed since the 1970s, retains elements of anti-utopian and dystopian fiction. In this sense, *Higanbana ga saku shima* can be interpreted as a utopian narrative developed on a dystopian substrate — a formation that closely resembles the development of the NIHONGO language spoken on Island.

Through *Higanbana ga saku shima*, Li Kotomi suggests the need for the continuous questioning of norms, categories and identities, as well as the urgency of looking at the “not-yet-here” with hope that is not passive but active, involving the collaboration of all actors as history-makers – even that of her readers. Hers is an attempt to question the present, hoping to go beyond labels of any kind and to surpass both individual and collectively labelled visions (including those of the minorities, like those of the people who invaded Island in the past).

Yona embodies the queer, utopian feeling for the future. The novel ends with the two girls gazing at the horizon of possibilities that expands before their eyes. Ultimately, this work can be read as something beyond utopia: as a hopeful manifesto full of utopian potentiality.

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<sup>53</sup> KURATA 2023: 33.

<sup>54</sup> TAKAHASHI/SAITŌ 2023: 331-341.

<sup>55</sup> NONAKA in NONAKA/INOUE 2022.

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