

## BOOK REVIEWS



## Polite Lies

### *On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures*

BY KYOKO MORI

NEW YORK: FAWCETT BOOKS, 1999  
258 PAGES. PAPERBACK: ISBN 0-449-00428-7

**K**yoko Mori grew up in Japan, moved to the United States to finish college, earned a graduate degree, and has taught creative writing at a number of universities. She is the author of several novels focusing on the experiences of young Japanese women including *Shizuko's Daughter*, *One Bird*, *The Dream of Water: A Memoir*, as well as the recent *Stone Field*, *True Arrow: A Novel*, about a Japanese woman living in America who embarks on a journey of self-discovery upon hearing of the death of her father, whom she hasn't seen in years. Mori's second memoir, *Polite Lies*, is a perceptive, well-written firsthand look at what it means to feel like an alien in both one's native culture and the society one has adopted as one's own.

*Polite Lies* has many strengths, chief among these Mori's keen and unrelenting eye for cultural incongruities in both Japanese and American cultures. Divided into essays with titles such as "Language," "Secrets," "Bodies," and "Symbols," the book's axis is the suicide of her mother, seemingly the result of Mori's tyrannical father's abuse and keeping of two mistresses, one of whom he married after her mother's death. Mori herself makes no secret of the fact that she has been both psychologically and physically abused by her father, and one gets the impression that her departure from Japan as a young adult was prompted as much by her desire to separate herself from her unhealthy home environment as by her wish to create distance between herself and her native culture.

The value of this book as a memoir lies in the fact of Mori's understated though always present demonstration of how, despite some hard knocks in the early years of life, she has managed to build a life she can call her own, and eventually come to write and

reflect on her experiences as a Japanese American caught, as it were, between two vastly different cultures. Also to Mori's credit is the fact that she does not downplay the difficulties she has encountered in her effort to make a life for herself in the United States, or in her painful and at times awkward attempts to come to some understanding of her relationships with family and friends still in Japan.

The book contains a wealth of reflections, many centering on gender-related issues, gleaned from Mori's life in the United States and visits to Japan. Though Mori views Japanese society with the critical eyes of an outsider, she neither likes or accepts all she experiences in America. Yet in America, it seems, she feels free of the restrictions placed upon her by a society that places high value on doing or saying what is deemed appropriate at all times and places. In the opening essay entitled "Language" Mori reflects that as soon as she boards the plane to Japan she begins to feel the net of constraints of the Japanese way of life as manifested in the language, something she is happy to have left behind. To her, as to her American readers, no doubt, Japanese concern with politeness, the code of silence in public places, and the seemingly bewildering number of ways Japanese must learn to address one another depending on age, social status, and rank, seems strange and excessive. Yet Mori does concede that the American brand of familiarity is not always to her liking, as when a young man she had never met before strikes up a conversation with her regarding his workout progress in the weight room of a health spa, eventually lifting his shirt and showing her his bare stomach as evidence of unwanted pounds.

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Chief among Mori's discomfort with certain aspects of Japanese life is an enforced gender inequality embodied in a language where men and women literally speak different "dialects," requiring that women speak in a much more indirect and informal way than men. It irks Mori that the very language she must speak in Japan forces her to be "elaborately polite, indirect, submissive, and unassertive," making it impossible for her to sound "intelligent, clearheaded, or decisive," a situation with no easy solution, since to not speak in this proper feminine way would make her sound "uneducated, insensitive, and rude" to the Japanese listener.

*Polite Lies* takes the form of a journey of self-discovery for Kyoko Mori, a journey toward deeper understanding of what has made her who she is, and towards understanding that the world is neither as simple nor as complex as she once thought it was. As we are carried along with her we are privy to some of her meditations regarding the meaning of her existence as a person suspended between cultures, trying to come to some level of acceptance of both the land and the people of her birth, and those of her adopted nation. In "Secrets" she comments on a key difficulty in trying to negotiate another culture, admitting that "one of the hardest things about living between two cultures is trying to decide what I can accept as different but well intentioned and what I cannot tolerate regardless of cultural differences." In her essay "Rituals" Mori comes to a deeper and perhaps more balanced awareness of the meaning of the "polite lies" she initially detests when she writes that "maybe it isn't even a matter of truth versus lies. The platitudes and polite lies we say are not true in the sense of accurate, factual statements, but they make an appeal to a larger truth—the truth of our good will."

Here, Mori reflects, we do indeed wish all will be well, as for instance when someone dies, and that they have lived a good life, even though we know they have suffered. We do wish, she suggests, to believe that loved ones will get over grief and life will somehow continue, for in this way "platitude does become truth . . . just as we are comforted by the rituals of altars and offerings, we do find hope in the familiar words of solace our friends offer us."

The rest of the book focuses on a variety of topics through thoughtfully-elaborated vignettes, including her ambivalence about married life and eventual divorce, life in the American Midwest, family and friends in America and Japan, the role of women in Japan, her early life in Japan before and after her mother's suicide, attitudes about love, sex, and marriage in Japan and America, cultural symbols, education, differing ways of expressing emotions, and finally the personal tragedy of her mother's unhappiness and suicide, all filtered through Mori's finely tuned critical sensibilities aimed toward better self-understanding. All this Mori does with an

underlying current of compassion for the behavior of others in culturally determined situations, bringing her ongoing attempts to understand her relationship to Japan and America back, in her final essay, "Home," to her early years with her mother, and the good things her mother left her in spite of her choice to die.

One weakness of Mori's book is that perhaps she sees the Japan she has left years before a little too personally, thus oversimplifying the complex ancient culture of her birth. At times Mori seems to allow her own difficult home circumstances growing up in Japan and rejection of many Japanese values to overly color her depiction of Japanese culture, which she sometimes sees quite negatively, particularly in regard to cultural mores involving conformity and women's issues, but in some cases also areas such as ritual, education, and art. Even so, as Mori would perhaps argue, hers *is* a personal book, with a host of personal reflections, and she makes no claims as to the "correctness" of her opinions beyond that they are hers.

Overall, *Polite Lies* makes for an enjoyable, informative read, and is suitable for both introductory as well as more advanced undergraduate literature or culture classes. While not all students will appreciate the book equally (this can't be helped), many will enjoy Mori's honesty and the range of the issues she deals with, as well as gain valuable information about Japan that can be used for classroom discussion and other follow-up activities. Instructors planning to use Mori's book should, however, be sure to know something about the issues she treats, since her stance is likely to prompt students to ask probing questions regarding the treatment of woman in Japan, for instance. This, of course, is good, though the instructor should expect to discuss such issues. I wouldn't recommend the book for use at the high school level, since Mori deals with issues that require a fair level of maturity and critical sophistication to sort out. Finally, using *Polite Lies* in the classroom along with one or several of the many videos available on contemporary Japan would certainly add to students' comprehension not only of Japanese culture, but also of how it feels to live on the border of two cultures, as many in our nation now do. ■

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**HOWARD GISKIN** is Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. He has edited a collection of Chinese folktales, and recently coedited *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (SUNY Press, 2001).