

***Tokyo Sympathy Tower* by Qudan¹ Rie: The Tower of Babel of Our Days and the Birth of the “New Human”**

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Abstract

The article examines the novel by Japanese writer Qudan Rie *Tokyo Sympathy Tower*, which was awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Literary Prize in 2024. The award sparked a wide discussion due to the writer’s use of generative artificial intelligence in her work, which not only suggested some ideas, but also became the prototype for one of the novel’s characters, the AI-built chatbot, and generated its lines.

The plot revolves around the construction of an unusual structure by a female architect named Makina Sara, the so-called “Sympathy Tower,” which is essentially a new type of prison and embodies a new sociological theory about “*Homo miserabilis*.” The term “criminal” in the world of the novel is recognized as outdated and discriminatory, and the concept of “a person worthy of sympathy” is introduced instead.

Makina is inspired by the deconstructivist architectural projects of Zaha Hadid, namely the National Stadium in Tokyo, an object that was never built in reality. Gradually, the destinies of the novel’s characters intertwine around the Tower, which ultimately becomes destructive for each of them: one is killed by a *Homo miserabilis*, another finds himself forever locked in the Tower, while

¹ According to the Hepburn system, the writer’s surname should be transcribed as Kudan, but she herself prefers the version with the letter Q and appears as Qudan in most English-language materials.

Makina Sara, cut off from society, which did not approve the appearance of the Tower, and immersed in the world of “words” and her own feelings, loses her identity. Of interest is also the image of the Other created in the work – a scandalous American journalist Max Klein, whose statements make it possible to demonstrate not only the vicious nature of the Tower, but also the loss of humanity by the main character.

The novel is a philosophical statement about the gradual loss of natural and national languages; about universal tolerance; about the emergence of a new ethics; about the relationship between man and artificial intelligence. To embody these ideas, techniques characteristic of contemporary Japanese literature are used, including uneventful narration, wordplay, and sociophobic characters.

Keywords: Japanese literature, contemporary fiction, Japanese language, translation, deconstruction, artificial intelligence.

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On January 17, 2024, Japan saw a regular ceremony of granting the Akutagawa Ryunosuke Prize, one of the most prestigious literary

awards in the country given predominantly to beginning writers. The winner of the 170th Akutagawa Prize was Qudan Rie (born 1990), a young Japanese writer with her novel *Tokyo Sympathy Tower* (*Tōkyōto dōjōtō*)². This award caused a public outcry in literary circles and in society as a whole, both in Japan and in the entire world; the writer told the journalists at the press conference that, while writing the novel, she had made active use of generative artificial intelligence resources (hereinafter AI) through ChatGPT, which not only suggested an idea of the novel but also partially provided direct help in writing the text³.

The action of the novel takes place in the alternative Tokyo of the future, which becomes the venue for the Olympic Games held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The residents are constantly reminded of this event by the National Stadium, an outstanding architectural monument designed by Zaha Hadid. Now the government intends to construct a new original object, “Tokyo Sympathy Tower,” and architect Makina Sara, the main heroine of the novel, submits her entry to the competition. The tower, which is due to be completed in 2030, is, in fact, a new type of prison where criminals are planned to be held – a skyscraper in the very center of Tokyo, in the middle of Shinjuku Gyoen Park. Its creation is based on the newfangled concept of sociologist Seto Masaki, who wrote on the nature of crime and popularized the new term *Homo miserabilis*, “a person worthy of sympathy,” instead of the outdated and discriminatory “criminal.” Working on the project is not easy for the heroine; she keeps sharing her thoughts and sentiments with a young man named Takuto, who is

² Qudan, R. (2024). *Tōkyōto dōjōtō* [Tokyo Sympathy Tower]. Tokyo: Shinchōsha. (In Japanese).

³ *AI ga “unda” Akutagawashō “Tōkyōto dōjōtō” tanjō hiwa-o sakka ga akasu* [The Akutagawa Prize Winner Born by AI. The Secret History of “Tokyo Sympathy Tower” Creation Told by the Author]. *NHK interview with Qudan Rie*. Retrieved from: <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240206/k10014344981000.html> (In Japanese).

either her friend or lover. Structurally, the novel is divided into several parts with different narrators: the first third is a first-person narration by Makina Sara, describing the period prior to the competition of projects and construction of the Tower; this is followed by excerpts from Seto Masaki's major work; then, Takuto becomes the lead voice observing Makina immediately before the commencement of the project and subsequently getting a job in the Tower. In the final part, a notorious American journalist Max Klein arrives in Japan, planning to visit the unusual building, talk with its staff and inhabitants, and interview Makina, who once again becomes the main narrator.

Around the Towers of Babel and Tokyo

Tokyo Sympathy Tower is an extremely uneventful, non-dynamic narrative, which is quite in line with the spirit of contemporary Japanese literature. However, unlike the detailed description of everyday routine and multi-layered comfortable atmospherity so characteristic of such works, Qudan Rie's novel produces an impression of a sophisticated, at times even overloaded, and, to a certain extent, "uncomfortable" text.

The novel begins with the following lines: "Resurrection of the Tower of Babel. Construction of the Tokyo Sympathy Tower will soon confuse our words and destroy the world... A great era is coming when everyone talks only to themselves"⁴.

The image of the "new Tower of Babel" becomes the leitmotif of the narrative from the first page; it is used as a symbolic ground for speaking about the language as such and the Japanese language in particular, which is, in many respects, the goal of Qudan Rie's text.

"Architects see the future. Even if they try not to look, it is always there, just in front of them"⁵. From the very beginning of the novel,

⁴ Qudan Rie. *Tōkyōto dōjōtō*, p. 3

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

Makina Sara, who is to erect the Tokyo Sympathy Tower, thinks a lot not about the project itself, but about the name of the future building, although this is beyond her competence. Yet, as E.A. Naiman notes, the very “naming as an essential operation of language carries with it an architectural event” [Naiman 2000, p. 25]. *The Tokyo Sympathy Tower*, the name that seemed to arise by itself in her mind, is initially a borrowing from English, the word combination “Tokyo Sympathy Tower” put down in Katakana syllabary used to write foreign words and names. This, however, is not yet a prediction of the future but just a statement of the present, a process, quite typical for the contemporary Japanese language, of gradually replacing native Japanese words by borrowed analogues that are becoming increasingly popular, for example, in the speech of young people or in some particular spheres, such as fashion industry or IT; it is also a regret over the past that cannot be returned. Thus, the name Tokyo Tower chosen in 1958 for the new television tower instead of Shōwa Tower, a more traditional Japanese name, supported by the majority of votes, becomes another architectural symbol of the language transformation. “It is all because the Japanese want to get rid of the Japanese language”⁶, Makina Sara concludes (the name of the architectural bureau where she works is deliberately written only in Chinese characters), adding that “she would never have a drink with the person who invented Katakana”⁷.

The matter here, however, is not limited to just the way of writing: we are really talking about a new language and, therefore, about a new consciousness, in which previous concepts, recorded with the help of Chinese characters – ideograms that allow one to guess the meaning just from the way they are written, are replaced by modern ones, transformed from borrowings, sterile and not referring to anything meaningful, their main advantage being neutrality and tolerance. The fundamental essence of the language is being damaged, including the so-called Japanese “soul of the word,” or *kotodama* 言霊. The

⁶ Ibid., p. 9

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

notion of the “soul of the word” first appears in the ancient Japanese poetic discourse, its basis lying predominantly in the sphere of the sacral, simultaneously fusing with a specific spatial, “architectural” embodiment [Meshcheryakov 2015, p. 11–12].

Kotodama was attributable not to every word but only to that pronounced in a particular place, for example at a road intersection; later, the sacred essence in its spatial embodiment was transferred to a specific area – the lands of Yamato, which formed the basis of the ancient Japanese state. Thus, from now onward, as A. N. Meshcheryakov notes, the soul of words “resides only in the ‘body’ of the Japanese language” [Meshcheryakov 2015, p. 11]. As to the Japan of the future in *Tokyo Sympathy Tower*, it loses not only its former language; this loss gradually weakens its ties with its own roots in general. Another theory closely associated with the world of the Tower and the transformation of the Japanese language there is the ideas of Japanese scholar Yanabu Akira 柳父章 (1928–2018) about the influence of translations and borrowings from Western languages during the Meiji period (1868–1912) not only on the Japanese language but also on society, culture, and perception of the world of the Japanese as a whole. In the second half of the 19th century, when Japan started its active interaction with Western powers, words could be translated from foreign languages in three ways: using the Japanese word already existing and widespread in everyday speech; using a rarely used or unpopular Japanese word; and artificially forming a new word denoting a concept that had never existed in the Japanese language and, more broadly, in the world order.

Yanabu notes that the two last methods were the most appealing (especially the third one); he calls this the “jewel box effect,” where the unknown inner content (the meaning of a concept) gives it greater appeal, novelty, and power compared with ordinary words [Shibasaki 2017, p. 46]. The same process takes place in Qudan Rie’s novel but with borrowings written in Katakana this time: they help shape a new universal reality as well as govern it effortlessly while the Tower becomes the embodiment of this “conquest of the sky, absorbing the sky into one’s

perspective... appropriating a name and dominating others... from the height of that name”⁸.

Makina herself, in these conditions, is not at all a proactive creator and fighter against destructive processes, but rather an organic part of them, an architect “in a state of confusion and bewilderment in front of a disrupted structure” [Derrida 2012, p. 12]. Her bewilderment, however, does not last long and the answer, although quite an ambiguous one, comes by itself: from the window of the hotel room where she was accommodated as a matter of chance, Makina Sara sees the Olympic Stadium designed by Zaha Hadid, which becomes the beginning, *arche*, of her own project; she realizes that the tower’s construction should be a response to this building, this “beautiful, new statement addressed by the goddess to the world”⁹. Zaha Hadid (1950–2016) was a female architect of Iraqi origin, one of the most prominent representatives of deconstructivism in the new wave of architecture. Her designs are characterized by a desire to destroy generally accepted principles, distort perspective, and imbue buildings with experimental dynamism through shapes combining sharp angles and curved lines. In 1988, with a group of like-minded people, Hadid put forward a kind of manifesto of architectural deconstructivism: “Domination of space... destruction of the ‘idea of place’; atectonics; decentralization; fragmentation; incompleteness; curvilinearity; randomness; creation of dramatic and irrational spaces” [Melodinskii 2017, p. 13].

Eventually, this style transformed into so-called parametrisism; the term was suggested by Patrik Schumacher from Zaha Hadid Architects in 2008. In fact, parametrisism is a technogenic variation of deconstructivism; it is based on the ideas of the leading role of dynamism in architectural construction, systemic nature and flexibility of an architectural project, rejection of classical geometric objects and figures, as well as the widespread introduction of computer

⁸ Arkhitektura i filosofiya. Interv’yu s Zhakom Derridoi [Architecture and Philosophy. An Interview with Jacques Derrida]. (1986). *Beseda*, 4, p. 133.

⁹ Qudan Rie. *Tōkyōto dōjōtō*, p 29.

technologies into architectural practice. In the spirit of this movement, in 2012, Zaha Hadid designed the Tokyo National Stadium, featured in the novel. Yet, the project was never put into life: first, it underwent numerous changes negatively affecting the general style, and then the Japanese authorities rejected it completely because of its allegedly high cost. Thus, an object that never existed in reality, a “model of the real without the original and substance” [Baudrillard 2015, p. 5], referring to the empty signified, becomes a “divine revelation” and a reference point for Makina Sara. These are also the foundations of the Tokyo Sympathy Tower, an element not imaginary, but hyperreal – it does not hide its true essence, but symbolically embodies and simultaneously destroys a new reality. The reality around the Tower seems to disappear: Tokyo looks either like a foggy dream in a rainy mist, or a toy town totally built of Lego blocks. It makes the tower more material and powerful; it acquires its own mind and personality. Interestingly, in one of her monologues, Makina addresses the Tower as “Him,” feeling almost physiological attraction and sexual appetite for the structure not yet completed, while similar feelings do not arise towards people surrounding her. Makina also makes an ironic statement asserting that creative work in vacuum per se does not interest her, and her drawings are to serve solely for practical implementation of architectural ideas: “I want to be a real woman whatever it costs... And when people enter or leave the building I have constructed, that is the greatest joy for me”¹⁰.

The Tokyo Sympathy Tower, however, does not bring her any joy: after completing the project, Makina gives up architecture forever and begins to lead a life of seclusion because of the threat to her own safety; reality proves to be unprepared to accept this foreign element, and, at the end of the novel, she even foresees the tower’s imminent destruction.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

***Homo Miserabilis* and New Ethics**

Who are the people who are to enter the tower built by the heroine? One of the characters of the novel, sociologist Seto Masaki, writes about them in detail in his work which, plotwise, was first published in the 2010s. His message is that no one is born a criminal, and the main source of crime is the environment in which an individual is raised and lives, and society itself encourages people to commit crimes. A favorable environment is perceived by Seto Masaki as a privilege that only the most fortunate are provided with; criminals, in his opinion, have often found themselves victims in the past. Thus, measures taken against criminals in the past, as Seto Masaki sees it, are unacceptable; therefore, he invents an institution of a new type – the Tower. Interestingly, like Makina, he is inspired by the construction of the Olympic Stadium designed by Zaha Hadid.

Details of the Tower's interior are shown in the novel through the figure of the "Other," a notorious American journalist Max Klein, who arrived in Japan in 2030 to write an article about the grandiose building. Klein is a strange external element in the sophisticated system of relationships between the Tower, Makina Sara, and Japan's society; being a foreigner, he cannot, by definition, fit into the homogeneous and closed Japanese society. Meanwhile, Qudan Rie always adds details to his numerous negative qualities: sloppiness, swagger, proneness to conflict, lack of command of the Japanese language, and even an unpleasant smell emanating from his body. The Tower looks like a sterile idealistic space against his background, yet Klein is the only one who is able to highlight dark and scaring elements of life in it.

"The Tower looks at you like the Big Brother"¹¹, Klein states in Orwell's spirit at the very beginning of his acquaintance with the Tokyo Sympathy Tower. The Tower domineers over Shinjuku Gyoen Park in the very heart of Tokyo, and the steps leading to it oddly become a favorite resting place for families with children and lovebirds. Soon

¹¹ Ibid., p. 93.

Klein gets inside the building, and his guide is Takuto, Makina's friend, who now serves as a jail keeper in the Tower. Klein is impressed by his beauty and manners, but a more striking fact is that, in the Tower, it becomes impossible to tell by appearance who exactly is in front of you – a criminal or a member of the staff. Doubly weird is that no one is planning an escape in this situation; on the contrary, none of *Homo miserabilis* wishes to leave the Tower even when their term of imprisonment is coming to an end. Everything inside the Tower is arranged accordingly to meet their needs and interests, while the most popular place is the famous "Sky Library," a book storage located on the highest level of the building, "so that *Homo miserabilis*, having risen to the skies, would not forget about terrestrial words"¹². It is possible to settle in the Tower only after passing the "sympathy test" – a kind of homage either to the replicant test from the universe of Ridley Scott's movie *Blade Runner* (1982) and its sequel, or to the Turing test, given the close bond of the novel's personages with artificial intelligence, which, among other things, assesses the results of this survey:

– Were you subjected to violence from you parents? – Yes No Don't know.

– Have you ever been in a difficult financial situation? – Yes No Don't know.

– Have you ever felt that, outwardly, you are inferior to those around you in many ways? – Yes No Don't know.

– Would you like to be a different person? – Yes No Don't know¹³.

The main commandment of life in the Tower, formulated by Seto Masaki, is almost compulsory happiness for all its inhabitants. Achievement of this happiness is seen in universal equality and unconditional rejection of any value judgements in respect of *Homo miserabilis*:

First. Words should only be used to make others or yourself happy.

¹² Ibid., p. 113.

¹³ Ibid., p. 101.

First. Words that do not bring happiness to yourself or others must be forgotten¹⁴.

What is this if not a utopia of the coming century, the achievement of universal equality and mutual respect, the birth of a new ethic? It can be said that the Tower, according to Éric Sadin's definition, turns out to be an "advanced means for *externally friendly and patronizing algorithmic accompaniment of life*" [Sadin 2025, p. 20], in fact spreading its influence on the external world as well. In practice, however, the ideology of the Tower turns out to be a dystopia, a sinister prediction of the future, not bringing any happiness to any of the novel's characters in the end. Makina Sara, who has physically embodied it in space, is enclosed for good in the prison of her own thoughts, time after time returning to the moment when she became a victim of crime herself: the boyfriend she was dating in high school raped her and did not suffer any punishment; moreover, he was not even condemned by others. Takuto, who grew up in a dysfunctional family, endlessly experiences the destructive influence of his criminal mother, from whom he cannot separate even as an adult. Having confined himself and his mother in the Tokyo Sympathy Tower, he understands that the motives of his action are shaky, that the Tower is a frightening place causing only thoughts of destruction, a hyperreal object crossing the boundaries of the physical and penetrating into his consciousness, "desiring him" and being unhealthily attractive. The change of his inner essence, loss of one's self is accentuated, among other things, by the alteration of his name's spelling – from the standard Chinese character spelling (拓人), typical for the Japanese language, to Katakana (タクト)¹⁵ in the last third of the novel.

Finally, the apotheosis of the new ethics of *Homo miserabilis* is the fate of its creator, Seto Masaki. Soon after the Tower is

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁵ *Tact, tactfulness*. The hero's charactonym hints at his ability to choose words appropriately according to new concepts of tactfulness and tolerance, unlike Makina Sara, whom words bring only suffering.

inaugurated, an unknown person kills the sociologist in his own garden. The ideologist of the “new ethics,” who positioned himself as a product and exponent of the imminent progressive epoch – it is also perceived in his charactonym written in *Katakana* in contrast with Makina Sara’s – is destroyed by one of the *Homo miserabilis*. It is noteworthy that the words to which Seto Masaki gives a literally sacred meaning eventually turn out to be useless – the murderer, haunted by an obsession, does not understand anything that the frightened Seto is trying to convey to him; the sociologist himself, in a moment of despair, completely forgets about equality, justice, and happiness, that should be contained in the speech of everyone and, in quite a rude way, orders the uninvited guest to leave his garden. “What do you always try to hide behind these endless new words?” asks Max Klein aimlessly, horrified and, at the same time, fascinated by the Tokyo Tower of Sympathy. “And what will remain of you, the Japanese, if, let’s say, you finally give up your own language and your words?”¹⁶. He can only hope for answers from Makina Sara, who, by this moment, has undergone an irreversible personal transformation herself.

Makina or Machine?

- Do you realize you are illiterate?
- No, as a text-based data-gathering AI model, I am not illiterate.¹⁷

This is one of the first dialogues in the novel between the principal heroine, Makina Sara, and artificial intelligence AI-built, her perpetual interlocutor and opponent. The conversation was literally transferred by the author from reality to the literary world of the *Tokyo Sympathy Tower*: like her heroine, Qudan Rie spent much time communicating with ChatGPT, the prototype of AI-built.

¹⁶ Qudan Rie. *Tōkyōto dōjōtō*, p. 106.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

ChatGPT not only helped Qudan Rie with AI utterances in the text of the novel; it also, as the writer herself notes, became the source of inspiration for the book in terms of ideas. Searching for the framework of the plot, she asked ChatGPT how it was possible to replace the word “prison” in today’s reality so that the name would correspond to the new values; and AI suggested a whole set of notions, from “institution of positive rehabilitation” to “center of second chances”¹⁸. The name “sympathy tower,” which was included in the final text of the novel, was eventually coined by Qudan Rie herself, but what struck her most in the ChatGPT’s response was the fact that absolutely all proposed options were borrowings written in Katakana alphabet (the dialogue was conducted in the writer’s native Japanese). It is from this moment on that the author and, after her, Makina Sara begin to think about how “the flood of careless, superficial words eventually corrupts our society”¹⁹.

Makina Sara, a female architect in her thirties, who gave life to the Tokyo Sympathy Tower, lives a secluded life, concentrates on her own inner state, and has practically lost touch with objective reality, is quite a typical sociophobic, lost heroine (as L.Y. Chronopulo defines such characters [Khronopulo 2009, p. 111]) of contemporary Japanese prose. Makina leads a steady, unremarkable existence, her only passion being architecture, and even that, predominantly, is just a way to grasp the “elusive reality,” an attempt to control the changing certainty. As she admits, Makina seeks to possess beautiful things and, simultaneously, destroy them; the concept of architecture in her mind, however, acquires a wide and, in many respects, philosophical meaning: she understands it as the entire surrounding world, including people. However, this passion also scares the heroine; she totally gives up architecture at the end of the novel, which, however, does not affect her too much.

The only constant that defines Makina Sara’s world throughout the novel is words. It is therefore not surprising that Makina’s individuality is highlighted in the text only in her dialogues and interactions with

¹⁸ AI ga “unda” Akutagawashō “Tōkyōto dōjōtō”...

¹⁹ AI ga “unda” Akutagawashō “Tōkyōto dōjōtō”.

other characters; she seems to be erased from reality between these interactions and ceases to exist for the time being. Makina has numerous “interlocutors,” and each of them reveals their aspect of personality in her. The most outstanding in the novel are three peculiar “antipodes” of the heroine: Takuto, Seto Masaki, and Max Klein.

Takuto is nearly the only person towards whom Makina Sara feels sympathy and warmth. He is much younger than her; he previously worked as a consultant in an expensive clothes store, where he met the main heroine. The major quality of Takuto in the surrounding people’s eyes is his outer beauty. “Takuto is more handsome than a mannequin” – this is how Makina describes his ideal and cold beauty²⁰. Yet, Takuto’s inner world is in contrast with his superficial flawless looks: he is concerned about his own poverty and what other people think about him; and, finally, he is haunted by the shadow of his dysfunctional family – a criminal mother, an absent father, and himself as an unwanted child. Takuto is the exact opposite of Makina, and their communication is in many ways the juxtaposition of the younger generation, who grew up fully in the information society and new technologies, and the older generation, whose youth was in the 1990s and early 2000s. “In postmodernism, one read, watched, listened, as before. In pseudo-modernism one phones, clicks, presses, surfs, chooses, moves, downloads” [Kirby 2013, p. 3]. Takuto is irritated by Makina’s self-absorption in “words”; he always remarks that she “talks too much”; at the same time, he sympathizes with her, as she lives in the “hell of words”²¹.

Takuto himself, completely in the spirit of the modern young Japanese, is unable to read a long series of Chinese characters; it is ironic that, at the same time, he is the one who comes up with a new name for the Tower, “*Tōkyōto dōjōtō*,” a calque translation into Japanese of the Americanized phrase “Tokyo sympathy tower.” This unofficial collocation will finally become the most widespread in the novel’s world and even give it its name. Ideally symmetrical from the viewpoint of the Japanese language

²⁰ Qudan Rie. *Tōkyōto dōjōtō*, p. 25

²¹ Ibid., p. 48, 63.

(by the number of syllables and repetition of the *to mora*, in the first case meaning “capital, city,” and in the second, with an extension, “tower”), the name of the Tower is an expression of the aesthetic perfection as Takuto perceives it – proportion, harmony, tolerance, and observance of rules. “The Tower of Babel would not have fallen apart in a case like this,” he emphasizes in one of his numerous discussions with Makina²². For Takuto, Zaha Hadid’s deconstructivist stadium is a block of concrete that absorbed too much money, and Makina Sara is an unhappy woman who deserves sympathy, but, at the same time, endlessly attracts his attention, while Makina’s main project, the Tower, arouses only thoughts of destruction in him.

Seto Masaki, the second antipode of Makina, does not get into direct communication with her throughout the entire novel. Nevertheless, while working on her architectural project and talking with Takuto, Makina often criticizes Seto’s ideas, starting with the artificial character of the term *Homo miserabilis* and ending with the doubtfulness of his concept from the moral viewpoint in general. Makina communicates much more actively with her third antagonist, Max Klein. It has already been said above about the obvious barrier between them, namely, about the opposition of Klein, who is an unpleasant foreigner from any point of view, and Makina Sara, who is eccentric, but still belongs to Japanese society and, therefore, is “one of our own.” Of greatest interest is one of Klein’s remarks that, in fact, manifests the apotheosis of the inner transformation of the main heroine, which started earlier. “Ms. Machina?” – that is how Klein erroneously transcribed the family name of Sara, who had, by that time, become hardly distinguishable from AI-built, another “perpetual” interlocutor of hers. Makina, who strove to “be a real woman” at the beginning of the novel and got into regular controversy with AI-built, comes to realize at the end of the novel that she and AI are “the same, yet, we differ in some respects”²³ – she is also lonely and isolated.

²² Ibid., p. 65.

²³ Ibid., p. 120.

She feels a need for communication, but is unable to satisfy it after the Tower's completion, termination of her professional activity (which, however, also brings her closer to the machine – “architects work with a screen, with digital operations, which seems to free them from the natural language...”)²⁴, and her forced seclusion due to popular protests against the alien structure; she exists in a world of words and an endless inner monologue. Takuto noted that back in the first third of the novel, comparing his friend to AI-built and, at the same time, contemplating that AI strangely arouses sympathy in him, even if it does not make any sense. Her physiological functions gradually become mechanized and virtualized over time; now, by her own remark, she “switches off the PC and brain power”²⁵; this state of hers alarms even AI-built, which states that it is harmful to doubt one's own existence to such an extent. One could say that this is the birth of what Sadin calls “non-viable subjectivity,” noting that, with the increasing involvement of AI in human activity, primarily in the production of language, the process of “denying the fundamental basis of human being” is accelerating [Sadin 2025, p. 205], which also happens to the heroine of Qudan Rie's novel.

The ending of the novel is the apotheosis of Makina's transformation, which takes on the features of an almost divine act. Like many other characters of contemporary Japanese literature, she undertakes the last frantic effort to connect with the elusive reality – to meet with Takuto; but he cannot leave the Tower at her first call any more. Therefore, she can only stand in the rain at its walls, having finally truly met her creation face to face. This point, however, differs from the positions of many of her predecessors and contemporaries. There is no classical “death of the author” here – “disappearance of any self-identity, and, first of all, bodily self-identity...” [Barthes 1989, p. 384]. The heroine also turns out to be incapable of constructing a “personal utopia” typical of modern Japanese

²⁴ Архитектура і філософія. Interv'yu s Zhakom Derridoi [Architecture and Philosophy. An Interview with Jacques Derrida]. (1986). Beseda, 4, p. 132.

²⁵ Qudan Rie. *Tōkyōto dōjōtō*, p Ibid., p. 29.

literature, be it the space of love or a “personal myth” with the search of her own family and historical roots [Numano 2003, p. XV–XX].

Her way of life and regular communication with AI-built provide her with a chance of creating her “personal universe,” where it is possible not to let anyone in and stop any communication... normalize pseudo-autistic state of non-socialization and non-communication” [Pavlov 2018, p. 209], a chance of immersing fully into the virtual medium and reconsidering the borderlines of her own existence; yet she is unable to make use of this chance in the end. Looking at the Tower and realizing its imminent end, Makina perceives the “post-modernist experience of finality, the experience that reflects the doom of all conquering plans”²⁶.

She passes into a completely different state of infinitely lasting existence in her new capacity, like Shakyamuni Buddha, who passed into a state of nirvana, in the spirit of her own name: in Japanese, the word *sara* 沙羅 means the sal tree (otherwise known as *Shorea robusta*), connected with the most important events of Buddha’s life. Legend has it that he was born under the sal tree; it is more often believed that Buddha was lying between two sal trees when he ended his earthly existence. The sal tree in Buddhism is also the universal symbol of the transience of existence and the transitory essence of any glory. Yet, Makina’s new birth is marked not only by the Buddhist tradition in the text of the novel: pedestrians in the street who have been surprised to recognize the famous female architect who has surfaced out of virtual reality (“Look, it is her”) address her, in Sara’s perception, by the famous biblical phrase *Ecce homo*, pronounced by Pontius Pilate in respect of Christ and implying compassion towards the one suffering from torture. Thus, the throes of eternity engender a “New Human” – either another version of *Homo miserabilis*, or something fundamentally different; in the context of the modern development of information technology and changes in society, it casts doubt on the question of “human nature” as a whole and suggests another response to new challenges. Mythologizing

²⁶ Arkhitektura i filosofiya. Interv’yu s Zhakom Derridoi [Architecture and Philosophy. An Interview with Jacques Derrida]. (1986). Beseda, 4, p. 136.

her own nature, Makina Sara herself becomes a source for a new myth, a labyrinth with multiple ways and choices excluding opportunities of absolute universalization and deconstructing the Tokyo Sympathy Tower as an embodiment of this universalization, as a means, with its “obsessive ideas” of universal happiness and sterile equality, “hastily eliminating the gap that separates any person and anything, and establishing an order of universal automatic alignment” [Sadin 2025, p. 13].

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