

# Iranian Woman's Challenge

By Masakazu HOSODA

The Akutagawa Prize, semi-annually awarded to new or rising authors of serious fiction, has been Japan's most prestigious literary prize since its establishment in 1935 because of its long tradition and distinguished authority. Chinese author Yang Yi last year became the first non-Japanese to win the coveted prize, named after Ryunosuke Akutagawa, an early 20th-century intellectual and author representing modern Japan.

About a year later, this July, Japan's literary journalism was abuzz with reports that an Iranian woman may win the same prize this year following Yang's feat. As it turned out, the Iranian nominee, Shirin Nezamafi, missed out, with the Japanese media reporting that she "lost a close race." This news seemed quite interesting to me in exploring the past and future of Japanese literature.

Nezamafi, a 29-year-old native of Tehran whose mother tongue is Persian, began to learn the Japanese language when she was in high school. After coming to Japan in 1999, she studied at Kobe University's graduate school and currently works at a major electronics company as a system engineer. She is, so to speak, an elite corporate employee.

She made the headlines of major Japanese newspapers as a dashing writer when "*Shiroi Kami*" (White Paper), a novel she wrote in the Japanese language, won Bungakukai magazine's prize for a new author in April. The novel, which depicts a romance between two high school students in Tehran at the time of the Iran-Iraqi war during the 1980s, was then nominated for the 141st Akutagawa Prize.

Both the Bungakukai and Akutagawa awards are sponsored by a major publishing company. In addition, Nezamafi followed in the footsteps of Yang, who was herself nominated for the Akutagawa Prize shortly after winning the Bungakukai award. This is why some journalists, unavoidably, sensed a clever ploy by the publishing company aimed at creating sensation.

One literary scholar compared Yang and Nezamafi in this way: Yang was forced to write in the Japanese

Photo: Kyodo News



Iranian writer Shirin Nezamafi poses with a copy of Bungakukai magazine carrying her novel "*Shiroi Kami*" (White Paper) that won the magazine's award for a rookie author.

language because her prize-winning work dealt with complicated relationships between Japan and her native country. Nezamafi's "*Shiroi Kami*," on the other hand, can be regarded as a simple love story, which means that she could have written the same stuff in her native tongue.

Even against such a background, Nezamafi's emergence in the Japanese literary world has a literary meaning, says literary critic Kazunao Tanaka. I fully agree with his explanation.

Tanaka summarizes modern Japanese literary history as follows: The literary world of modern Japan tried to emulate Europe. But after its efforts went awry with the country's defeat in World War II, it turned to America as a new model. While experiencing deep emotional conflicts, Japan produced full-fledged postwar literature and from the 1980s onward has bred writers accepted by the

rest of the world, like Haruki Murakami. In the meantime, non-Japanese who had written literary works in Japanese were Koreans who were forced to learn the language during the prewar colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula or a handful of European or American intellectuals who were strongly interested in Japanese traditional culture.

"Since the turn of the century, people of the world have gradually begun to choose Japanese as a free written language. This means that Japanese literature appears rich in the current world and tempts some people of the world to add to it things hitherto unwritten," Tanaka writes. "This represents nothing but glory for numerous authors who have so far written in Japanese as well as a benefit for all of us who read Japanese."

It is easy to criticize Nezamafi's work within the framework of traditional Japanese literature and by its conventional evaluation standard. But contemporary Japanese people who are trying to realize "a Japan that goes along with the rest of the world" should find no reason for not being pleased to see their native language adopted by people of the world, though gradually. **JS**

Masakazu Hosoda is chief editor, Cultural News Section, Kyodo News.