

## A Chilly Warm World of Foxes and Humans

### -- New Reading of Buying Mittens Written by Nankichi Niimi

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#### Abstract

The foxes, the characters created by the Japanese fairy tale author Nankichi Niimi, experience the conversion of space and identity, language and identity, and finally the world of the foxes encounters the world of the humans after reading the text of "Buying Mittens". Only read between the lines can understand the implication of the text. The work should be read from the angles of the conversion of identity, language and the meaning of the rhetoric, so that to unveils the fact that the two worlds separated by invisible barrier formed by space, discourse and identity. It appears a warm world, but it is very chill actually.

#### Keywords

Nankichi Niimi; Buying Mittens; Surface Discourse; Identity Conversion; Text Reading.

#### 1. Introduction: Nankichi Niimi and Its Fairy Tale Buying Mittens

Japanese genius writer of fairy tales, Nankichi Niimi's writing capability seem careless, in fact it is in high degree of professional proficiency. The simple story seems plainness without varnish and amazing words, however, a wonderful but slightly sad philosophy slowly dip into the mind of the readers. The greater the writer is, the stronger creativity permeated in all aspects of his work. The "world" of Nankichi Niimi is far-reaching through all the details of the work. [1] p.58 Buying Mittens[2]p.1-8, one of his fairy tales, is an excellent work of him. In the eyes of the general readers, this is a warm and touching fairy tale; however you will feel a kind of coldness after the warmth when you read carefully. If O Henry's novel is the smile of tears, Nankichi Niimi's fairy is "smiling sadness".

The beginning of the fairy tale is very simple, which tells that in a winter, the fox mother living in the forest wanted buying her child a pair of woolen gloves. However, when the fox mother led the little fox to the suburbs of a small town, they did not dare go forward any more. The fox mother had to let the little fox go to the town by itself. In conventional thinking, going from the wild to the town is equal to going from barbarism to civilization. The suburb of the town splits the world into two incompatible worlds: the rural and the urban. For the foxes living in the wild, it was exceptionally difficult to step into the area of human settlements in the small town. Physical barrier was not terrible; what terrible was the invisible barrier: shape, genus, economy, status, prejudice, etc. The invisible barrier made it so difficult for fox mother to buy a pair of woolen gloves to her baby.

In some places, readers need to appreciate and complete the implication of the article, in other words, the reader need to actively participate in the re-creation of the work. As Roman Ingarden thought, "Works is a structure full of uncertainty and blank, the reality of the work needs the readers to confirm and fill." [3]294 the uncertainty and blank can be interpreted from several angles such as the questioning of identity, language conversion, and rhetorical significance of

this fairy tale. In order to understand, our comment sequence will consistent with the narrative order other than disturb the original narrative structure casually.

## 2. The Wild to the Town: Spatial Fracture Exposes Identity Crisis

Nankichi Niimi's fairy is often brief with simple words, but this fairy tale describes the snow in the wild with more words unexpectedly to create a beautiful world. At the start of the fairy tale, the author generously uses hundreds of words in length to describe the world of ice and snow in the little fox's eyes, such as silk floss, spray, rainbow full of imageries of soft, warm and sweet. When the little fox runs on the soft snow as silk floss, the snow powder was falling down in succession, which reflected as a small rainbow. The fine snow was covering down to it, but there was not a little danger even a little strange sense. It rolled in the snow, enjoying the gift of the nature, and asked its mother some childlike problem from time to time. Because the nature was so beautiful, his mother was so kind and careful, their action and mind were unconstraint, and it nearly became the spirit of the snow. In the little fox's eyes, the snow was falling from the branched like some white silk threads. The snow decorated the world beautifully while it covered everything on the earth. It was a beautiful world without any footprints of human on it. The scenery made the fox feel free without any hindrance – all demonstrated the cleverness and love of the little fox.

If they haven't had the snow, the little fox and its mother might forget the fox world. But the fox was so little after all, its mother worried about frostbite, so they decided to go to buy a pair of mittens in the town after dark. Why they chose that time? Nankichi Niimi skipped it with a stroke of a casual tone. Without careful thinking, they might take it for granted. But it worth thinking for a while, the French Western Marxist literary theorist Pierre Macherey said that "we should further explore the things which do not or can not express in those silence of the work." [3]p.86 Or, the silence may link with the true meaning of the works. It's important to find out the meaning hidden in the text even between the lines rather than just read the words. As mentioned above, the wild was the paradise for the fox, but what was the image of the town in their eyes? The author did not write out but to sketch with just a few words. Facing humankind, the fox mother no longer dared to have half a step further. The town was the world of human creature, a world excluding the other creatures. Here, the kind fox was subject to danger. The hideous face of human was unveiled by Nankichi Niimi's fine description: "However, the fox mother can't move a step forward." [2]p.3 In the area connecting the field and town, as the space changed, the identity of the fox is changed subconsciously and dramatically.

So, the fox mother approached to the adjacency of town in the dark night. The darkness could shelter the identity of the fox, which made fox mother feel safe. Perhaps, humankind is a kind of creature lazy to think, and relies on the visual image in the daily life. Since the ear of Plato and Aristotle, the mankind "has established a set of cognitive system and the value order in line with the standards of visual"[4]p.2. In fact, the fox mother's behavior has subverted the world: The real world does not depend on the visual, because where there is light, there is the human prejudice, by which humankind judges the heterogeneous. The fox mother deliberately avoided the light, because she thought the lamp light was terrible, which evokes some bad memories between the fox and humankind, so she could not help stopping. In contrast, the world in the innocent little fox's eyes was not so terrible. When they closed to the small town, the little fox thought that the light in front of them was that of the stars; when it walked in the town, it found that beyond its expectation: "The lights are like the stars with red, yellow and blue colors." [2]p.5 However, the lights of the town were absolutely different in the eyes of the fox mother with much bitter experience with mankind, which make her legs became limp when she saw the lights.

The fox mother came to town by dark night, because she realized that the night might shelter the identity of her and the little fox and screen the prejudice. However, since the little fox would buy mittens, it has to face humankind ultimately, and the identity might be exposed. But how could it get rid of the discrimination and hatred from the mankind? The fox mother expected that in such a cold snowy day, the mittens seller might leave the door unlatched and open a little. So the mother turned the paw of the little fox into the hand of the mankind. "Mom, how strange it is! But what it is?" [2]p.4 In the eyes of the innocent little fox, the hand of humankind was so strange. Mom just gently told it, if it wanted to gain the human identity, it's necessary to deform the paws. The reason why the mother would not tell her child about the cruelty of the adult was to protect it from hurting mentally. As the kind-hearted and optimistic young Jewish man Guido Orefice in the film "Life Is Beautiful (La vita è bella)" concealed the inside story of the Nazi killing machines to his son Giosuè, instead, he said that was a game in which he could earn points to get real tanks as an incentive. A few words with some funny expression betrayed his passion for the child, which drew the tears down.

Living in a disadvantaged condition, the fox mothers took the way of deforming the child's hands in order to obtain the recognition of humanity, and avoided being injured by humankind. This smart adaption in reality was to fight against the strong human world. "The literary works reproduce different individuals, so it made to obtain the identity through struggle in personal world or the struggle between the individuals and groups: Either submit to the social norms and expectations, or make a stand against it." [5]p.116

### 3. Fracture of Language Communication Deepens Identity Crisis

The fox mother has solved a problem for the little fox to buy mittens in the small town: turned one of the fox paw into the hand of mankind. Changing one paw was enough; the clever fox mother thought, the mittens seller would open the door only a little in such a cold day. As to why turned the paw into a hand, the fox mother finally confided the truth when questioned by the little fox: because it would go to town for shopping. The reason why the humankind caught the fox was not because fox was evil, but because the stereotype misled them. In this regard, the fox mother hit the nail on the head, "If people find that you are fox, they will not only sell the mittens to you, but also will seize you and put you into cage. What a terrible creature the man is!" [2]p.4

Then another obstacle arises: the language. In the imagination of the old fox, the man is so rigid and terrible, so she patiently taught the rigid dialogue politely: "Good evening", "Could you give me a pair of mittens just right for the hand?" In Sapir's view, language is a social phenomenon closely related to the nation's history, customs and belief; he even said that "Language is the most gigantic, most extensive work of art as we know, or the anonymous work which was created for generations unconsciously, which is as great as the mountains." [6] p.156 Human language is a kind of exclusive history, customs and belief systems. For the mankind, the languages is a work of art, but for the fox mother, the language of mankind is just a kind of communication tools and protective barrier when they try close to the human beings, namely, it is a way to prevent themselves from being hurt.

However, only the language attaches to certain performer can it makes sense. The little fox learned to use polite language, but it was still betrayed for a flaw. When the little fox wandered in the town, it saw that "on the street, every house had closed the doors and warm light leaked from the high windows and shone on the roads covered by snows". [2]p.5 It can be described as timely and properly that on the deserted streets the small fox could avoid possible harassment. Unfortunately, the little fox was so panicked when the light flashed out of the door that it stretched its paw in it mistakenly and thus exposed its identity. Then, what happened? The man always kept in silent said "Ah" loudly for he worried about that the little fox would

shop with leaf. For the people, no matter how polite the voice of the little fox, it can't sound nice as that of the white copper coins. However, the man complies with business ethics, and gave the wool mittens to it. But when it expressed its thanks, the man still kept silent.

In fact, as long as we read this article, we will find that in the entire process of buying wool gloves, the seller just said, "Please pay for it firstly" [2]p.5 besides a sign "God!" When the little fox said "Good night" and "Thank you", the man still did not answered. In the description of the mittens buying, Nankichi Niimi sketched the seller's action of identifying the coins in this way: "He took it on the fingertips, and clashed them against each other." It implies that the man extremely distrust in fox, even the innocent little fox. The indifference and prejudice to the fox shows between the lines. The coins "gave out pleasant sound of tinkle". [2]p.6 Here, the word "pleasant" is marvelous in two aspects: For the shopkeeper, it means income and profit; for the little fox, it means it is going to have a pair of wool mittens, which signifies the treatment of humankind. But innocent little fox did not expect that his communication with mankind turned out to be so chilly. This is human's prejudice or stereotype as Walter Lippmann once said that "stereotype system may be the core of our personal tradition, a kind of protective mechanism for our social status." [7]p.61 Here, what the shopkeeper demonstrated was to protect his social status against the non-human creature.

In the entire process, the shopkeeper held the attitude of rejection and horror while the small fox was ebullient and quite politely. In the dull process of selling and buying, only the sound of the coins was pleasant. The communication between the man and little fox only was based on the relationship of money. Only rely on the link of money and the dark night to shield the prejudice, in addition to a day's walk to the town, can the little fox get a chance to communicate with humans. However, such communication was in the extreme suspicion and prejudice of humans. It was the first time that the innocent little fox communicated with humans, so it didn't know how terrible the man was and regarded the dangerous communication as a wonderful experience. Who can imagine when the little fox went for wool mittens, how the fox mother was worried in the outskirts of town? She might worry about that: Would the little fox encounter the villain? Would it be subject to discrimination? Would it be seized? She was the powerful patron saint of her child in wild, while he lost the courage to accompany her child when it went to the town. Why the empty street couldn't tolerate a fox's walk? What power held back the fox mother's step? Surely it doesn't mean that it was safe for the naive little fox to buy mittens by itself.

In fact, the huge gap between man and fox had come into being. An invisible barrier separates the two to isolate, and the barrier was: stereotypes. Of course, such stereotype includes stereotypes of fox to humans. For example, the fox mother thought, "If people find that you are fox, they will not only sell the mittens to you, but also will seize you and put you into cage. What a terrible creature the man is!" [2]p.4 But what the little fox encountered was not so horrible. Human just guard against it that thought it would buy things by leaves. After he got the money and had some identification, he sold the gloves to the little fox. Although there merely exists of cold commercial relationship between man and fox, after all, the little fox took a step in dealing with people. However, the prejudices of the people on fox were deep-rooted. When the shopkeeper saw the paw of the little fox, "he couldn't help saying 'God'. He thought that it was the paw of fox, and the fox might take leaves to buy mittens." [2]p.5 So he asked the little fox to pay first. Money is the fairest medium. When people want to get money, identity and prejudice seems to be vanished. The man sold the mittens to the little fox so unexpectedly that it thought: "Mom once told me that human is a kind of terrible creatures, but they're not so awful at all!"

#### 4. From Child World to Adult World: Two Vastly Disparate Worlds

At the end of the fairy tales, the little fox heard the dialogue of the child and its mother, but it didn't catch the overtones. "The deep meaning can be presented from another sense...What the speaker says is to name, but the signifier does not directly referred to or involve in locutionary meaning or implication, which is called the consequences of making words." [1]p.23 It is the ingenious feature of Nankichi Niimi's fair tales, where shows unfair in places seemingly fair, draw chilly tears at seemingly warm places. "When it passed by below the window of a family, a woman's voice came from inside. What a warm, sweet and tender sound!" [2]p.7 However, the tender feeling of human was just for their babies, because in human's mind, the fox was just "the other" who could be imagined but could not be friends. It was a relationship of "being imagined". Of course, the mother of human creature also mentioned the little fox when she amused her baby to fall sleeping, whose tone seems so tender, but, how about the tone of mankind when the little fox buying mittens? The little fox was the baby of mother, but the why the amiable, pleasant and calm voice was held back then? Let's contrast it to the plot in film Tarzan, in which the ape mother is so kind to the human baby.

However, there was little chance to dialogue between the fox and the people except they were in the commercial relationship. It might impossible to have equal dialogue between the human and the fox until both of them went back to the primitive world. In fact, the naive child was not influenced by the adult world. Take a look at the end of the article. When the mother soothed her baby to sleep, it asks: "Mom, how cold tonight! The little fox in the forest must fell very cold, very cold, right?" [2]p.7 But its mother didn't answer the question, instead, she said, "Now, the little fox in the forest must lie in the cave. It is listening to its mother singing and is going to fall asleep. Baby, come on and fall asleep. I'll see who fall asleep first. You? Or the little fox in the forest?" [2]p.7 Here, the rhetoric of skipping [8]p.226 indicates the implacability and indifference of the human to the fox euphemistically – even the mention of the little fox was just means to comfort her child. The warmth was being avoided saying out, the ruthless and selfish of human was all clear. The little concern about the little fox in the childhood of human faded away in the seemingly warm but indifferent attitude.

There are some indistinguishable omits in Nankichi Niimi's fairy tales either for the needs of the plot or they are inconvenience to say left more space for the readers to imagine. It is also the merits for Nankichi Niimi's fairy tales. It's difficult to experience the care and thought of the writer if you appreciate the fair tales by the conventional way. Those who believe in this fairy tale shows "a love of the world" may abuse their imagination. "Imagination may seize the stimulus factors and results, but the middle and inner things are often described by the imaginary man with clumsy comics, just as a fat soprano plays the role of a lovely girl in the intention of the composer." [7] p.108

What belongs to the little fox was not the town where every house full of light and warmth, because it was a terrible place for it, in which even the fox wanted to buy a pairs of mittens should go in the darkness of the night to avoid human injury. In the human world, no one cares about the little fox whether it feels cold or not, but to guard against whether it will obtain the gloves with leaves. Whether the child will become the man as the shopkeeper? The little fox's world is in the wild with no light except for starlight. The fox mother was there, in the snowfield, waiting for her lovely baby backing. Perhaps, although it is cold there, but it is the place that the little fox can really get warmly love.

It makes us think of the little girl of Andersen's fairy tales who did not sell a match and dare not return home. On Christmas Eve, she suffered hungry and cold and nobody cares her on the chilly street, no one would have bought her a match or gave her money in the whole day. The stove, the roast goose, and Christmas trees were beyond her reach and could be enjoyed only in an illusion. That peaceful street was full of happiness but couldn't share a shelter for the little girl

without a penny, so her home belonged to the only one destination – heaven, where her grandma was waiting for her. We may admit that the little fox was more fortunate, because the wild was a paradise, where the fox mother was waiting for it; however, if there were not two cupronickel coins, then the town would have been the hell for it, namely, human was the hell for the little fox.

## 5. Conclusion: Invisible Social Barriers and Two Incompatible Worlds

Nankichi Niimi's *Buy Mittens* seems so simple, but in reality it is a meaningful fairy tale. It is very perfect that the literary and the ideological meanings are so closely combined. When the little fox was elation for having the mittens, it thought that the human was not a bit terrible. The fox mother still kept a cool head and doubted the malicious human: "Is human really kind? Do you think so?" [2]p.6 This fairy tale is ended with rhetorical question of the fox mother.

In short, only read between the lines of the text can we study the signification reflected by the signifier; only probe into the inner work can we thoroughly understand the deep meaning. We should read the fairy tale from the aspects: questioning on identity, the barriers of language and the significance of rhetoric to understand the merit of the art and ideas of the fairy tale in depth. The fairy tale unveils two incompatible worlds: the worlds that are separated by space, language and identity and other invisible barriers – It is seemingly warm, but in reality it is chilly to the bone with sorrow and tears.

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