



### Introduction - "Do you know what a forked tongue is?":

A forked tongue is a common feature for many species of reptiles, it is less common among humans. The tongue of most reptiles is naturally split into two tines at the tip, but, in order to achieve the same thing, one has to endure a 'tongue splitting': the painful and slow process of enlarging the hole of a pierced tongue until it can be split by cutting it with a scalpel or cauterizing and tying it off.

It is after her encounter with Ama, a young man of punkish appearance (hair dyed red and undercut, tattoos, piercings all over his face and, above all, a tongue split in two) that Lui, the main character of *Snakes and Earrings*, decides to get her tongue pierced in order to have, just as Ama, a forked tongue.

Soon enough, Lui's life seems to revolve exclusively around her relationship with Ama, and his friend Shiba, the owner and operator of a tattoo-parlour called Desire, with whom she starts an affair.

The story of *Snakes and Earrings* could seem simplistic, based on the use of overused love triangle trope, but in reality it goes far beyond that, slowly taking the reader into the collapsing mind of a young woman trapped in a self-destructive spiral.

*Snakes and Earrings* is the first novel written by **Hitomi Kanehara**, a young Japanese author. The novel won several awards such as the Akutagawa Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Japan. Hitomi Kanehara is one of the two youngest people to ever win this prize. In her novels, she addresses the experience of being young in contemporary Japan which echoes back to her own personal experience (she dropped out of high school, lived on the street and even attempted suicide).

The main character of the novel, Lui, is a young woman no different from any other, living in a contemporary Japan. She is described as 'looking like a Barbie Girl' and behaving like one. Her life seems to revolve exclusively around going to clubs and making herself look pretty. The fact that she embodied so perfectly a society of beauty and consumerism is put into contrast with the way she is oddly drawn to body modification, 'the underground world' and its people.

When she meets Ama at a club, she is instantly mesmerised and admires him (as well as Shiba) for their queer appearances. However, it is not her admiration for their looks which will lead Lui to undergo the process of getting a forked tongue and even her entire back tattooed. Throughout the novel, the reasons for her fascination with body modification remain ambiguous despite the novel focusing almost entirely on her. However, as the story goes on and several disturbing events occur, it becomes

clear that the root of her fascination is linked to her desire to feel acute pain, pain being the only thing she seems able to feel.

### **Part I (Masks) - Body modification: a mean to unravel masks:**

One of the themes used in *Snakes and Earrings* is the appropriation of masks. The novel only counts three main characters and two of them wear masks or have a distinct duality to their personalities.

From the beginning of the novel, Lui, the main character, is presented as superficial and self-absorbed. Her appearance and de facto her entire being often reduces her to being a 'Barbie-girl/Bimbo' or in Japanese, 'Gyaru', a derogatory term used to refer to young women with bleached (or dyed) hair, heavy makeup, decorated nails and who are obsessed with fashion. Lui falls perfectly into that description, but she rejects the term and what it entails. She refuses the word because she thinks it does not apply to her and, as the novel goes on, the readers will discover that Lui is more than that.

Throughout the book, two descriptions of Lui are given: the aforementioned, a physical and mental description which seems to be accepted by all the characters of the novel (Lui's girl friends as well as Ama and Shiba) but stands out as a more 'external' and therefore 'superficial' view of Lui against her inner self. In opposition to her 'External self', Lui's inner self is much darker and colder. If others describe her as a 'bimbo' she herself only has the word 'empty' coming to mind.

This dissociation between Lui's 'external self', which we can call a mask, and her inner self is underlined early in the novel by the character of Maki, Lui's supposedly 'best friend' whom she introduces to Ama. Like Lui, Maki is a 'bimbo' and is instantly wary of Ama and the influences she thinks he has on Lui. Because the Lui she knows is like her (hence a Bimbo), she doesn't understand her friend's sudden interest for body modifications or her desire to be pierced and tattooed.

The fact that this interest might not be 'sudden' does not occur to Maki since she only knows Lui through her mask and the persona of the 'bimbo' she assumes to be real.

It is only during her interaction with Shiba that Lui's inner self seems to unravel. Once alone with the man, she does not hesitate to tell him straight away that she is a masochist. Though their relationship mostly revolves around their sexual intercourses, it is also punctuated by deep discussions where, at last, Lui's words and thoughts match. In front of Shiba, she lays herself bare both physically and psychologically.

In the novel, Shiba seems to be the only one to whom one is incapable of pretending. Indeed, if Lui has a secret and 'exclusive' relationship with the tattoo artist, she is in fact not the only one. At the end of the novel it is revealed that Ama was in a similar situation. Because the story is told from Lui's point of view, the revelation of Ama's 'mask' comes as a surprise: To the reader, as well as to Lui and the other characters meeting him (such as Maki, Lui's friend), Ama appears as a gentle character, lovable because of his soft, almost childish personality and demeanour. Only once in the novel the author will let the reader see through Ama's mask: When he eventually kills someone.

Even if it could come as shock and could have been *the* point where the reader truly sees through Ama's mask, it really is not. The murder is accidental, for Ama only wanted to protect Lui's from a dubious man harassing her in the street. He beats him to death, yes, however it is not that act of violence which is really important but what comes after: Ama pulling the man's teeth out and giving them to Lui as a token of his love.

This violent act is an indication that, just as Lui, Ama might not be who he claims to be. Lui, however, quickly dismisses this idea. Because she only knows the sweet and childish Ama, Lui entirely rejects his violent act, diminishes it, and even dyes his hair to try changing his appearance when an investigation

is eventually launched and a suspect with Ama's description is actively sought by the police. Lui feels a motherly responsibility for her boyfriend and these feelings even reach the reader as Ama is seen as childlike and incapable of voluntarily doing anything wrong.

As said before, the unravelling of Ama's mask comes as a surprise, both to Lui and the reader and is, once again linked to Shiba. When Ama eventually disappears and Lui decides to go to the police, she realises that even though they have been living together for months, she doesn't know anything about Ama: His real name, his age, where he works, nothing. The only one who does is Shiba. When Ama's body is eventually found and the police reveal that he has had homosexual intercourse prior to his murder, Lui is incapable to answer whether or not she knew Ama was bisexual. She is at loss and once again turns to Shiba, an act which will make her eventually understand how Ama and she were in similar situations: Hiding their true selves behind masks only Shiba seemed capable of seeing through.

Throughout the book, Shiba is the only character whom the reader knows everything about. The only one out of the three main characters who does not wear any masks. He is straightforward and honest when asked questions, be it about his family, his sadistic behaviour, his bisexuality or the fact that he wants to kill Lui during the act. Paradoxically, he appears as the most mysterious and ambiguous character, especially to Lui.

*"I think I might be a child of God" he said without changing his expression. "Think about it, God has to be a sadist to give people life." (Page 7)*

By many aspects, Shiba can appear as a divine figure: He seems incapable of lying, but does not reveal others' secrets either. Both Lui and Ama 'confess' to him their true selves but he does not share it nor judge them. Likewise, he considers body modification an act that only God should be allowed to do.

*"(About forked tongue) I think it's an interesting idea, but unlike piercings and tattoos, it involves actually changing the shape of the body. I wouldn't want to do that myself. I think only God has the right to do that." (Page 7)*

The fact that it is revealed at the end of the novel that Shiba in fact killed Ama during sexual intercourse is also something to take into account, especially because, throughout the novel, Shiba often tells Lui that he wants to kill her during intercourse and there is no doubt that he told Ama the exact same thing.

In the novel, Shiba is not confronted by the fact that he killed Ama, but one can wonder if, as a divine figure – as the 'child of God' – his sadistic behaviour towards Lui and Ama and eventually the murder of one of them is not an act of punishment, for both changed the shape of their body, challenging in a way the work of God.

## **Part II (Apatheia) - The limits between Art and self-destruction:**

*"When body modification is felt to provide a solution to internal conflicts" (Under the Skin - Alessandra Lemma)*

In *Snakes and Earrings*, Lui, the main character of the novel, uses body modification as means of self-harm. It quickly appears throughout the novel that Lui is deeply depressed, shown in her alarming descent into alcoholism and, later on, anorexia. Most of the time she is stuck in a state of constant apathy: She does not feel anything, she does not have any interest for anything. When her boyfriend Ama eventually underlines her addiction for alcohol she ignores him, when Shiba points out the fact that she does not eat anymore, she ignores him.

*“After all, there's no point in me waiting for a solution when I don't even have a problem in the first place. Life just seemed so empty, that's all.” (Page 36)*

When she meets Ama for the first time, Lui is excited because of his forked tongue: She seems to see life and the possibilities it offers in another light. However, it is not a forked tongue she was truly looking for, but the pain she would have to endure in order to obtain one.

Several time in the novel, Lui describes the different size of studs, underlining the fact that the larger the stud, the stronger the pain. Indeed, this pain is the primary reason why the process of enlarging a pierced hole is so slow (months in order to be able to split a pierced tongue). Despite knowing this, Lui willingly rushes the process by inserting larger studs in her tongue in a short period of time.

*“There was nothing for me to believe and nothing for me to feel. In fact the only feeling with the power to kick me back to life was the feeling of acute pain.” (Page 40)*

Lui's piercing and tattoo are not the only means she uses to shock her body out of its constant state of apathy. Under the pretence of having her back tattooed, she quickly starts a sadomasochistic sexual relationship with Ama's friend Shiba. However, as she tells him, it is not the first sadomasochistic relationship she has had. Despite her young age (nineteen years old, meaning she is underage in Japan), she knows she is a masochist. One may wonder—if her incapacity to realise her state of depression also prevents her from seeing how both her masochistic behaviour and her apathy are in fact intertwined.

*“Simply put, there was just no light. My life and future were pitch black, and I couldn't see anything at the end of the tunnel.” (Page 37)*

*“I thought of how my life had no real possessions, no emotional ties, no hatred” (Page 35)*

If Lui's desire to have a forked tongue is a means to feel more pain, this does not necessarily exclusively explain her eagerness to have her back tattooed. She often states how meaningless her life is, but Lui also describes how empty it is and how she wants to keep everything close to her, inside of her, to feel whole.

In *The Inner Predator: Trauma and Dissociation in Bodily Self-Harm*, Sharon K. Farber explains that *“Attachment theory helps us understand how human beings can become so attached to pain and suffering that they cannot imagine living without it.”* This applies to Lui perfectly. Throughout the novel the reader can see how inapt she is at forming true and healthy relationships. Although Ama is as dependent on her as he is devoted to her, Lui is incapable of connecting emotionally with him. It is only when Ama dies that she seems to truly consider him and even then it is not truly Ama she longs but the feeling that he entirely belonged to her. This is proved by the way she decides to crush the teeth he gave her (as a token of his love) and ingests them.

*“Because I wanted everything to become a part of me. Because I so wanted Ama to melt into me. He loved me and I would rather have him become one with me than disappear from my life. Then I'd never have to be away from him ever again.” (Page 43)*

It is the same way she describes the tattoos on her back: *“They'd never betray me, and without eyes they'd never fly away. They'd always, always be there.”* (P36) Moreover, this dehumanisation of Ama is even more emphasised by the fact that after discovering that Shiba killed Ama during sadomasochistic intercourse, Lui does not go to the police. Instead, she hides the evidences which could incriminate Shiba, the same way she did to Ama when the police were looking for him.

This incapacity to connect with others or feel anything but pain is undoubtedly linked to her depression, but the roots of her apathy in the novel are unclear. Furthermore, the realisation at the

end of the novel that Lui and Ama's cases and behaviours were exactly the same makes one wonder: What if their state of mind and their desire to break away from it by using pain was in fact the common traits of a generation?

*"All I wanted was to be part of an underground world where the sun doesn't shine, there are no serenades, and the sound of children's laughter is never, ever heard."* (Page 21)

In the novel, we do not know much about Lui's life before meeting Ama. In fact, the novel, narrated solely from her point of view, starts with Ama and Lui's first encounter. After that she instantly moves in with him and exclusively spends time with Ama and his friend Shiba. Even when she mentions her friend Maki, she only says that she met her in a night club and nothing more.

This could be explained because of the structure of the novel which could be described as belonging to Literary Minimalism. Minimalist writing is characterised by an economy of descriptions: the context dictates the meaning. *Snakes and Earrings* captures and focuses only on a short period of time in the life of its characters, what comes before and what comes after is just superfluous. However, more so than the structure, it could also describe the characters' generation commonly known as the Millennial Generation or the Generation Y. Both Lui and Ama are underage (Ama is eighteen year old, Lui is nineteen year old) and have distanced themselves from their parents. They both are temporary workers and does not seem to care nor to think about what the future has to offer. As Lui often says, *"There is no light in my future."* (Page 46). In the movie adaptation of *Snakes and Earrings* (2008) it is shown by the way she disgustedly look at several children while walking on the street. If she does not see any future for herself, she does not see one for these children either.

The acute monotony of Lui and Ama's lives is also underlined by their activities which, throughout the book, are repetitive and only revolve around going out to eat and drink. The only things which break this routine are their numerous encounters with Shiba and therefore the brutality it ensues which seems to be the only thing capable of drawing them out of this apathy.

In this regard, Lui's first encounter with Ama is the same. When she sees Ama's forked tongue, she instantly wants to have what he has, to be part of this 'underground' world in order to feel something.

In *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification*, Alessandra Lemma says *"If the other is perceived to possess the wholeness or unity of which the self feels deprived, then envy may be mobilised"*

The way Lui perceived Ama and, later on, Shiba pushed her to seek what they had, or rather what she thought they had: a wholeness she was lacking of. Therefore, splitting her tongue and getting the same tattoos that each of them have on her back (Ama's dragon and Shiba's Qilin) was, to her, her only means of obtaining that.

### **Conclusion:**

Because of its themes, *Snakes and Earrings* managed to reach the interest of many, especially in western countries which are not unfamiliar with such books described as belonging to the Transgressive Fiction genre. Indeed, *Snakes and Earrings* may seem to fall into this genre because of its excessive amount of sex, violence and the critic eye it sets on an apathetic millennial generation: Its pessimistic view of the future but also its indifferent behaviour towards all excesses.

In the novel, even after having witnessed her boyfriend Ama beat a man to death and pulling his teeth out, Lui stays strangely placid. Ama's case is even worse as he gradually seems to forget what he has done, resuming his life with Lui like nothing ever happened. These apathetic reactions towards violence can be found in many books of the Transgressive Fiction genre such as Bret Easton Ellis' *The*

*Rules of Attraction* (1987) where violence is regarded as normal. In Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* (1999) this lack of reaction towards excessive amount of violence is even pushed to the point of being parodic.

However, although *Snakes and Earrings* explores such themes and shares similarities to these and most books of the Transgressive Fiction Genre, it lacks the 'commitment' most characters of Transgressive books have to break away from their situations, often imposed on them by society.

Indeed, while the characters of *Snakes and Earrings* appear to be part of a counterculture closely linked to the punk subculture, they lack the rebellious ambitions of the earlier generations of their western counterpart. Despite their appearances, Ama and Shiba live mostly quiet and mundane lives. They both work average jobs, earn wages, and are both polite and well behaved. Shiba even tells Lui that his ambition is to get married and to settle down with a family of his own. In total opposition with what their appearances might suggest, the lives of *Snakes and Earrings'* characters are remarkably conventional and ordinary. In this regard, the 'underground world' Lui yearns for seems only a part of a consumer society where tattoos and piercings are just another thing to buy and try.

Even Lui, who displays a kind of nihilistic behaviour (refusing to be reduced to a label, rejecting and challenging the presuppositions of society), appears from time to time to accept to conform to the norms of this society.

*(About wearing a kimono) "When I first started, I didn't know how to put mine on either" (Page 24)*

Working from time to time as a 'companion girl' (a job consisting of pouring drinks all night for wealthy guests) forces her to sometimes assume a most traditional appearance (by wearing a wig to hide her bleached hair, hiding her piercings and wearing traditional clothes). This aspect of her personality shows that even though she can pass as a nonconformist, she also knows that, in order to live even a life she is not satisfied with, she has to fit: A realistic aspect of the novel which echoes especially in our society where even the more rebellious among us still have a 'day job' to help them get by.

Likewise, the end of the novel shows the same kind of realism. Although Lui seems so eager to act after seeing how Ama's murder is disregarded by the police as well as by Ama's family (mostly because of his marginal appearance), it ends up as an anti-climax: Even though she knows that Shiba killed Ama, she moves in with him and never says a thing, maybe because she has nowhere else to go.

Because of this end, the book has been partly criticised as being 'unfinished'. However, one can wonder if that was not the primary intent. The novel starts with Lui's encounter with Ama and finishes with Lui being able to move on from his death, as cold or shocking as this act may seem. From its beginning to its end, *Snakes and Earrings* was just a glimpse into the life of a young woman – a surprisingly realistic one – who, despite the location of the book, could have been anyone.

And, as in real life, sometimes there are no answers, no epic closure: life simply goes on.