

# CONFRONTATION, EMBARRASSMENT AND REFLECTION: JAPAN MEETS THE WEST

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## *Abstract*

In this paper, I try to analyze the cultural gap between Japan and the West from a comparative literary point of view.

After a very long period of national seclusion, Japan was obliged to open herself to the world. The government controlled by warriors soon came to an end and a new era of the Meiji began in 1868. For most progressive people in the Meiji Era it was an urgent necessity to modernize their country and modernization was nearly equivalent to westernization.

On the other side, there were men of letters who did not approve of this hasty westernizing. Okakura Tenshin suggested in *The Book of Tea*: “Let us stop the continents from hurling epigrams at each other, and be sadder if not wiser by the mutual gain of half ahemisphere.... You have gained expansion at the cost of restlessness; we have created a harmony which is weak against aggression. Will you believe it?

— the East is better off in some respects than the West!”

Nitobe Inazo, who served as under secretary general of the League of Nations for seven years, published

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*Bushido: The Soul of Japan* in 1899. He appealed that the main motive of Japan's transformation was Bushido or the code of warriors.

In *Silence* Endo Shusaku made a quondam missionary observe that "this country is a swamp... Everything, if it is planted in this swamp, begins to wither from its roots." Endo once declared, "I grieve that there is no drama where there is no God. My dream as a writer is to make this grief compete against European novels that describe man's conflict with God."

It is doubtless that Bushido is no longer the soul of Japan. Besides, foreign ideas have not filtered into Japanese people's hearts. They are inclined to run after unfruitful pleasures without deep emotion. Japan should earnestly wonder what to do with her heritage and how to communicate with the West.

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When he traveled to France, Shimazaki Toson recalled how much he was shocked to see "kurofuno" depicted in a picture. "Kurofuno" is a generic name for large black Western vessels. Toson wrote to his deceased father: "For me the West was still a black ship. It was a phantom, a ghost. I wished to see more with my own eyes what it really was."<sup>(1)</sup>

Toson's *Before Dawn* is a grandiose novel about a man's destiny in the midst of a drastic change. After a very long

period of national seclusion, Japan was haunted by Western fleets and was obliged to open herself to the world. The government controlled by warriors soon came to an end and a new era of the Meiji began in 1868. Aoyama Hanzo in *Before Dawn* is the head of an old family in a remote mountain district. He becomes doubtful of the forestry policy of the new government. Hanzo furthermore questions the Meiji Restoration itself and clings to his studies of Japanese classical literature. He finally sets fire to a Buddhist temple and dies as a lunatic. This character, whose model has been believed to be the novelist's father, may be Toson himself.

Progressive people in the Meiji Era tended to think that it was an urgent necessity to modernize their country and modernization was nearly equivalent to westernization. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a representative of rationalistic and pragmatic thinkers, asserted that Japan should not wait for the neighboring countries to be enlightened and that Japan had to get rid of Asia to go with civilized Western states.

On the other side, Okakura Tenshin published an English book, *The Ideals of the East*, appealing that Asia is one. Okakura wrote in *The Book of Tea*: "When will the West understand, or try to understand, the East?... Indian spirituality has been derided as ignorance, Chinese sobriety as stupidity, Japanese patriotism as the result of fatalism."<sup>(2)</sup> He then made the following suggestion: "Let us stop the

continents from hurling epigrams at each other, and be sadder if not wiser by the mutual gain of half a hemisphere. We have developed along different lines, but there is no reason why one should not supplement the other. You have gained expansion at the cost of restlessness; we have created a harmony which is weak against aggression. Will you believe it?—the East is better off in some respects than the West!”<sup>(3)</sup>

Okakura was curator of the Oriental art division of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Toson valued Okakura highly and wondered why he could have such an insight and wide knowledge about the relationship between Eastern arts and literature or religion. In “Seeking After the Last Century” Toson remarks that “we are used to seeing only the brilliant side of the new age that was brought with the restoration and are apt to ignore the horrible sights. . . . All the literary and artistic works created at the beginning of the Meiji are poor. They are even worse than those of the later shogunate time.”<sup>(4)</sup>

He also had a chance to visit the United States. He pointed out, “The newspapers have many pages and the Sunday editions are specialized and tremendously thick. This shows that American men are so eager to raise efficiency that they have little time to enjoy reading in quiet.”<sup>(5)</sup> Seeing a factory hand in Detroit draw more than twenty-five hundred lines under the windows of the cars a day he imagined, “One cannot work pleasantly if the job

is simple, however intensely he is tempted with a high salary. What kind of excitement or entertainment will this startling division of labor and mechanization make him seek?”<sup>(6)</sup> Toson thus had a keen critical view of civilization.

Toson, by the way, noted that most Japanese men who went to North America earlier than him used to be warriors. “Their unperturbed spirits, years of cultivation and pride enabled them to compete with Westerners, but they energetically looked for teachers throughout the world. . . . I feel my predecessors’ strong ability to understand. Moreover, I am pleased to find in the warriors of the preceding century a sympathetic nature to accept truly good things for the construction of new Japan.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Nitobe Inazo, who served as under secretary general of the League of Nations for seven years, wrote *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* in English. This book was issued in 1899 and the word “Bushido” means the code of warriors. Nitobe explains as follows in *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*: “The transformation of Japan is a fact patent to the world. Into a work of such magnitude various motives naturally entered; but if one were to name the principal, one would not hesitate to name Bushido. When we opened the whole country to foreign trade, when we introduced the latest improvements in every department of life, when we began to study Western politics and sciences, our guiding

motive was not the development of our physical resources and the increase of wealth; much less was it a blind imitation of Western customs.”<sup>(8)</sup> He was certainly among ideal Japanese warriors whom Toson admired. He died in Canada after he attended an international conference.

A story entitled “Handkerchief” was written by Akutagawa Ryunosuke. It is said that Professor Hasegawa, a character in “Handkerchief” was modeled on Nitobe Inazo. Hasegawa is worried about Japan’s mental depravity and he believes that the only thing to save this corrupted society is Bushido. For him Bushido is not a narrow-minded morality of an island country but it in a sense is similar to Christianity in Europe.

Although Hasegawa majors in colonial policy he tries to skim through books concerned with students’ thinking or feeling. On a summer afternoon he was reading Strindberg’s dramaturgy. According to the book, after an actor finds out a way of expressing common emotions, he is likely to rely upon the technique and it becomes a form or “Manier.”

Then a student’s mother comes to his house to tell him that the student, who was in hospital, is dead. She speaks about the son’s death quite calmly even smiling a little. Hasegawa, however, notices that her hands are trembling and she holds a handkerchief tightly as if she were tearing it. This behavior seems to

him a Japanese woman’s Bushido.

But later on the same day, he finds in the dramaturgy a comment on a lady who tears a handkerchief in half with a smile on her face. Strindberg regards this as a double performance and calls it “Mätzchen,” which is theatricality.

Akutagawa was well-read in Japanese, Chinese and European literature. Through this story, he perhaps wished to hint that Bushido and Japanese tradition in general would not be properly understood by the Westerners. He killed himself when he was thirty-five years old, leaving a note which said that the reason for his suicide was just some vague uneasiness. His anxiety might have partially grown out of the crucial cultural gap between Japan and the West. Akutagawa was interested in Christianity. Reportedly the Bible was by his pillow when he committed suicide.

His “Smiles of Gods” deals with the problem of religious belief in Japan. Padre Organtino, a Jesuit, wonders if his missionary work in Japan has really been successful, even though there are tens of thousands of Christians. He unexpectedly meets an old man who introduces himself as one of Japanese spirits. He insists that they have a power to change, not to destroy. “Even Jesus might become an inhabitant of this country. China and India have changed. The West has to change, too. We are in the woods, in shallow streams, in the winds that blow rose blossoms and in the

evening sunbeams remaining on the church walls. We exist anywhere and anytime,"<sup>(9)</sup> he warns.

*Silence*, authored by Endo Shusaku, features a priest who smuggles himself into Japan from Portugal to preach secretly in the period when Christians were suppressed. He is compelled to place his foot on the figure of Christ to show that he has given up his belief. Then the man on the bronze plate, reminiscent of a resurrected Christ, seduces him by saying, "Trample my face. I know the pain of your foot better than anyone."<sup>(10)</sup> This compromising attitude can be related to the image of Christ for the Japanese. A quondam missionary in *Silence* observes that "this country is a swamp. . . . Everything, if it is planted in this swamp, begins to wither from its roots."<sup>(11)</sup>

In Endo's "Yellow Man" a Catholic confesses to a priest, "Let me repeat that, unlike you, I, as a yellow man, do not have serious or solemn things such as a sense of guilt and nihilism. There is only exhaustion, desperate exhaustion. It is somber, wet and gloomy like my yellowish skin."<sup>(12)</sup> He goes on having affairs with his cousin simply wishing to turn his eyes away from the dark environment. Endo once declared, "I grieve that there is no drama where there is no God. My dream as a writer is to make this grief compete against European novels that describe man's conflict with God."<sup>(13)</sup>

It is doubtless that Bushido is no

longer the soul of Japan. Besides, foreign ideas have not filtered into Japanese people's hearts. They are inclined to run after unfruitful pleasures without deep emotion. Japan should earnestly wonder what to do with her heritage and how to communicate with the West.

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