No Sushi Recipe for a Japanese Story: Japanese Authors in Review

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In 2011, when Sam Anderson landed in Tokyo, he floundered, grappled, lost his way and was shocked to find no English speakers to help him around. He was on his way to interview the well-known Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami and, well, he was very late for the appointment.

What went wrong with Sam? In this unusual case, we may take the creative liberty of saying, he got caught in a story and perhaps lost the plot.

It may seem pretty dramatic, but what actually happened was that Murakami unfortunately let him down. As Sam, critic at large for *The New York Times Magazine*, wrote in a 2011 article,

> Under the influence of Murakami, I arrived in Tokyo expecting Barcelona or Paris or Berlin—a cosmopolitan world capital whose straight-talking citizens were fluent not only in English but also in all the nooks and crannies of Western culture: jazz, theater, literature, sitcoms, film noir, opera, rock 'n' roll. But this, as really anyone else in the world could have told you, is not what Japan is like at all. Japan—real, actual, visitable Japan—turned out to be intensely, inflexibly, unapologetically Japanese.

While he was later picked up by Murakami's assistant and we were rewarded with an insightful article, *The Fierce Imagination of Haruki Murakami*, the incident triggers fundamental ways of "story-making" and its relation with "reality/specifics." Sam's experience of Murakami is not unique. In fact, as is now a well-known fact, the leading Japanese author's works have often been criticized for not being Japanese enough. He describes himself, in an article by Steven Poole in *The Guardian*, as the "outcast of the Japanese literary world," an "ugly duckling" and never the "swan."

Kazuo Ishiguro, the British novelist who left Japan when he was five years old, only to return after a long 30 years, is another author who has often suffered the anomaly of an identity when it comes to his readers. Often, he seems to disappoint a new global reader who expects his novels to be reflexively aligned with his proper name and country name.

On the flip side, someone like Junichiro Tanizaki, who constantly explored sexuality and eroticism within an evolving Japanese society, probably more easily fits into the image of a "Japanese" storyteller. Or, acclaimed writer Banana Yoshimoto perhaps could be tagged as more of a Japanese storyteller because she describes youth and their angst in modern-day Japan.

But why do we tend to pin down a "story" and imprison it within the confines of the rubric of a country, its language and people? What, in fact, makes a story Japanese or not-so-Japanese?

Element of Familiarity

Yoko Ogawa's *The Housekeeper and the Professor* is set in contemporary Japan. Originally published in 2003, the novel explores the relationship between a mathematics professor

and his housekeeper. The professor, following a severe head injury in an accident long ago, can retain no more than an 80-minute bout of fresh memory. In other words, his short-term memory gets refreshed every 80 minutes—although his memories preceding the accident remain intact.

This particular novelistic strategy of building the story on an inverted trick of memory or any other human element as Portuguese writer José de Sousa Saramago did with the epidemic of blindness has nothing national about it but has a notional allegory as the motive. This has become a dominant European way of novelization.

Nonetheless, in the present instance, the Japanese professor copes with his daily life, predominantly supported by a housekeeper. In the course of the novel, we are introduced to a little boy, the housekeeper's son. His affectionate relationship with the professor leads us to another side of the old man's personality and makes the plot novel.

In the entire novel, there is nothing that the reader can register as overtly Japanese. Instead, it is the story of two people who bond with each other amidst a range of personal specifics that are within the personal ambit of human experiences. For a reader experiencing the novel in English, there is no way to sniff out any Japanese clue, even if she were to don a detective's guise. It is just a story that we can relate to spontaneously.

In the reader's mind, as the daily events unfold—with the housekeeper trying to grasp the mathematical equations that the professor puts forth—rarely does one imagine the housekeeper in a kimono or the professor slurping Ramen (Japanese noodle soup). Instead, the reader floats along with the characters, trying to follow the beauty of numbers.

The professor is a problematic "client," and several housekeepers have already been sacked. This housekeeper, who is new, seeks the key to a stable job in her new client's house. She is exhausted with working in a string of different houses, trying to meet the demands of her job. When she is sent to the professor's house by the placement agency, she is ready to stretch herself to keep the job, while aware that the job is difficult.

As the story sets the pitch for a gradual and intense rapport that borders on the personal and the professional, in no way do the characters trespass the thin line of a social construct called "decency." Also, the dynamics between the employer and employee stick to a familiar hierarchical grid. However, gradually, the housekeeper tries to decode a web of memories in flashes—sometimes stored in hidden boxes and sometimes in the sparkling eyes of an old, weary man.

While she uses the abstraction of numbers to comprehend the incomprehensible man hiding behind it, there are moments when the variables of life barge in and mess up a neat mathematical formula. If we were not equipped with the knowledge of the author's name, we would have perhaps not even had a latent consciousness of the novel being a Japanese one. Mathematics professors have a reputation of being forgetful, absentminded, kind but erratic, and definitely cranky. In other words, people with a special mind belong to a distinct genre/species with which we are familiar.

Since *Auto Da Fe* by Elias Canetti (1935), the professor-housekeeper relationship has

become a favorite with the novelists as this intimate dailiness opens up a series of events of interpenetration of two separate domains of the cultural and the physical.

The reason we are able to relate to Ogawa's story is that stories or novels do not have borders or boundaries. They are essentially your or my story. Our broader experiences are drawn from a template, which is determined by human experiences or the perceived empirics of life. Even if they are tweaked, the totality of human experiences is such that however abstract it may be, we can stretch ourselves and still touch it, understand it along with its nuances. Those experiences are not subject to geographical contours or countries we reside in.

Also another pertinent point could be that the modern virtual world today blurs an apologetic territorial consciousness. An American or a Japanese teenager in California or Tokyo and an Indian teenager in Mumbai are in no way privileged or disadvantaged because of their location. Living in the virtual time that we are, they are all homogenous products of a conglomerate global culture—a consequence of the digital invasion.

International digital platforms, be it either visual (Instagram) or dating sites (Tinder, OKC) or social media (Facebook), are soon creating a linear world where any global engagement—literary or otherwise—is routine and regular. Hence, reading a Japanese novel may be no longer delving into an unknown world. With the invasion of *manga* culture or the Anime series—now a global favorite, there is a natural element of familiarity in the foreign, Japanese or otherwise.

Grief in monochrome

Another example could be Banana Yoshimoto's *Moonlight Shadow*. The story of two young people who have lost their partners to an accident dwells upon the pall of gloom that engulfs them and how it creates shadow lines in their lives. The accident has no causality. It is a given.

Hiragi, Satsuki or Urara could be youngsters from anywhere—Russia, China, America, or India. The sadness that they carry in their hearts; the heaviness that seems to weigh them down; the irreparable sense of loss they wake up to everyday has nothing particularly "Japanese" about them. Rather, it is a life-component that any reader from anywhere will be able to relate to. Grief does not come with any nationality, skin color, facial features, or a specific DNA composition.

A Family Supper by Kazuo Ishiguro again seems to reflect a similar universality. A son comes back to stay with his family; the mother has passed away and the father has a strained relationship with the son. The sister is a supporting prop who helps us take a peek into the father-son duo's minds from her perspective. Yes, it indeed is about a Japanese family, but the story has little to do with the Japanese part of it.

Strained relationships are an inseparable component of modern families—more so between fathers and sons. And like in most of those relationships, behind the facade of this autocratic father, lies a vulnerable human being who knows deep inside that now that his son has grown up, he has lost that essential hold on him. Yet, he does not want to accept it. He keeps trying, as if rehearsing for a come back. Does that sound very Japanese? Perhaps not.

According to the Swedish Academy, Kenzaburo Oye, the Japanese author who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994, "creates an imagined world, where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today." Interestingly, Oye at his Nobel banquet speech said that he is a "strange Japanese" whose childhood was influenced by Nils Holgersson (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* by Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf). As the boy from Shikoku Island grew up to study literature in Tokyo, works of Dante, Balzac, Rabelais, Sartre, and Yeats, to mention a few, had a deep impact on him. In fact, his writings do not find much appreciation in his own country. Not only because he blows out the flame of appearance that he feels the Japanese wind-cup presents, but also because his narrative structure is a departure from the customary lyrical style that focuses particularly on the "beautiful." Instead, his style of grotesque realism is broken and abrupt, challenging all traditional notions of the Japanese storytelling modus operandi.

Yet, Oye's stories are deeply Japanese—reflecting the "Oriental" caught in the aspirational cacophonic imitation of the "Western"; conveying the country's war and postwar histories; expressive of an intriguing script/language that lends itself to intricate nuances not always aptly tangible in translation. But, finally, whether Japanese or not, Oye is best known for his ability to connect the "personal" and the "universal" through stories that are intricate narratives of human experiences; of truths that are his or hers; their or theirs; mine or yours; Japanese or not-Japanese.

Is the novel as an art form then dichotomic? It is written in a language that is particular to a nation or country or territory or locale. And it weaves a universal out of the territorial. The cinema has "light" as an equipment. The novel has to, unfortunately, describe a "light." And "light" is to be seen and not to be read about.