

Tradition & Modernity in Junichiro Tanizaki's Writings

By Mukesh WILLIAMS



Author Mukesh Williams

No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind. But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the color it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied.

– Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (1933)

The heart of mine is only one, it cannot be known by anybody but myself.

– Tanizaki, *tanka* (1963)

The thoughts and writings of Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965) (Photo 1) reflect an interesting mixture of the modern (*kindai*) and classical (*koten kaiki*) with ever-changing themes to cater to a demanding audience. He was not interested in eulogizing the past but in understanding how the present was shaped by it. He extolled the virtues of Japanese history, culture and aesthetics but also felt the pressure from rampant urbanization, industrial capitalism and Marxist ideology. Often an essentialist in thought, he wanted Japan to remain unchanged but realized that an unstoppable change had already set in. There is a lament in his tone and yet a celebration of the times. Tanizaki remained a writer *par excellence* whose works were quite popular in his lifetime, beginning with his first short story, *The Tattooer*, in 1910 and ending with his last

novel, *Diary of a Mad Old Man*, in 1961. For a Japanese writer to be popular during a writing career of nearly 55 years is a rare distinction that not even established writers like Natsume Soseki, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai or Naoya Shiga could enjoy. Many English translations of his works have made Tanizaki global.

European historical, political, literary and confessional discourses had a deep impact on the intellectual and psychological makeup of Tanizaki. They find expression in such politically and socially bold works as *The Tattooer*, *Naomi* (1924-25), *A Blind Man's Tale* (1931), *The Makioka Sisters* (1943-48) and *The Key* (1956). Brought up on the transnational erotic-grotesque psychology of Japanese sexologist Kogai Tanaka and the confessional literature of 12th century Japan, Tanizaki crafted stories *in media res* to represent primordial passions such as a tattooer's search for beauty, the simultaneous narrations of a blind masseur and Sengoku Jidai heroine, the moral degradation of Naomi, the declining fortunes of the Makioka sisters and their futile attempts at finding a husband,

PHOTO 1

Photo: Mainichi Newspaper/AFL0



Tanizaki in Japanese clothing, 1927

and the devious schemes of a sexually hyperactive professor in *The Key* to force an adulterous relationship between his wife and a family friend to heighten his own voyeuristic pleasure.

Through these stories Tanizaki heralds the destruction of traditional Japanese aesthetics, the rise of the nuclear Japanese family and the proliferation of Western modernity in Japan where traditional standards do not work. He is both fascinated and troubled by urban consumerism, Marxist thought, cinematography and contemporary social practices. This makes it difficult for him to choose between Japanese and European values. His characters are torn between the two, reflected both in the choices they make and the imagery the writer uses. For example, the subtle interplay of light and

shade in *The Key* manifests Tanizaki's *avant garde* literary theory developed two decades earlier in his essay on Japanese aesthetics *In Praise of Shadows* (1933-34). *The Key* has fascinated the West for decades and was made into a movie called *Odd Obsession* in 1959 and another called *La Chiave* in 1983.

Tanizaki's novels invariably deal with man-woman relationships, the subtle shades of human intentions and their subterranean passions, which often lead to misunderstanding and tragedy. His love and nostalgia for the passing away of the Japanese tradition forces him to resist Westernization and to direct his highly individualistic fiction beyond traditional Japanese values into a world of private fantasies and universal totalities. His fiction can be seen as a fiction of transition, social tension, inherent contradictions and weak ego where the other becomes a phantom of the self. The women are dominating mother figures or destructive geisha seductresses, while the males are weak, often impersonating female characters as in Kabuki theatre. And yet he is an intriguing writer.

Early Life

Tanizaki had a unique upbringing in a changing society. Born in Nihonbashi, the commercial district of Tokyo, into a merchant class family, he grew up in relative luxury, but later, as his family fortunes fell, he became deprived and could not pay his tuition fees at Tokyo University. He could not complete his studies and dropped out of the university in 1911. In his impoverished moments he remembered his rich grandfather calling him “Junichi, Junichi” and his mother breast-feeding him.

The experiences of his early life might have had a lasting effect on his mind and literary sensibility. Tanizaki had quaint ideas about the world which were often revealed in his fiction and prose writings. In *Some Prefer Nettles* (1928-29) he tells us that men who love women in youth turn to collecting art works, tea sets and paintings in old age as a compensation for sex. In *In Praise of Shadows* he observes that Japanese love things that “bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather” and desire old houses and objects that become “a source of peace and repose.”

Western Ideas

His personal observations about interpersonal relationships became intertwined with his perception of Japanese society in transition. He felt that Western modernity in Japan made ancient traditions and customs quite untenable, undermining a way of life that was still quite endearing, such as the use of *washi*, paper lanterns, lacquer work, unpolished silverware and appreciation of beauty (*Photos 2*). Tanizaki campaigned for the restoration of Japanese aesthetics, notions of feminine beauty, the loveliness of oriental skin and the allure of shadows.

But although Tanizaki lamented the passing away of the glorious era of Japanese tradition and aesthetics he also welcomed Anglo-American culture with genuine interest. In his early years he read a lot of American and European writers, who had an impact both on his themes and evolution of his plots. It is possible to see in his fiction the combined influence of Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire and the French Decadents. His short story *The Tattooer* creatively mimics *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which he incidentally translated into Japanese. The story takes its cue from Wilde by revealing how a woman’s character begins to change after an artist tattoos an enormous female black spider on her back.

Fascinated by the West and the expatriate community in Japan, he moved to Yokohama in 1922 and lived in a Western-style house, leading a somewhat bohemian life. When the Great Kanto Earthquake occurred in 1923 Tanizaki was vacationing in Hakone and instead of thinking about the welfare of his family he was filled with a “perverse surge of happiness” imagining that Tokyo would be made into a “decent city” with cars, movie theaters, beautiful parlors and Turkish baths. After the earthquake he wrote the novel *A Fool’s Love* which unravels the travails of breaking with the past and aping the alien present of Yokohama. The hero’s attempt to train a bar girl, who looks like Mary Pickford, backfires. He finds himself in a difficult situation, as his wife turns promiscuous with foreigners. In *The Whirlpool* (1928), Tanizaki tells the story of an evil Buddhist nun posing as a model for a painting.

Impact of Western Psychology of the 1920s

Both the media and the academic discipline of psychology were responsible for emphasizing the role of deviant sexuality in social life. These ideas spread not only in Japan but also in the colonies. The transnational psychology of the 1920s in Japan was quite preoccupied with the erotic grotesque, as represented by Kogai Tanaka. These ideas had a deep influence on subsequent writing in both Tokyo and Osaka, such as Tanaka’s own *Sex Maniacs* (1925) and Ryuzaburo Shikiba’s translation of de Sade’s *Juliette*. Editors Hokumei Umehara and Kiyoshi Sakai started the erotic magazine *Grotesque* (1928-31), followed by *Kamashastra* (1927-28). Many writers like Tanizaki took up the theme of sexual liberation and sexual deviance rather seriously and wove these themes into their writings. In the 1930s the Japanese press accelerated the popularity of the term *eroguronansensu* or “erotic grotesque nonsense” in describing popular culture. Some Japanese writers resisted the codes of Western ideologies, while others succumbed to them. Yet a minority felt ambivalent, Tanizaki among them.

A lot of this ambivalence may not be apparent in English translations at all. In *Some Prefer Nettles* he explores the somewhat unsettling emotions of a prosperous businessman when his adulterous wife wants to buy her freedom. The scenes set against the backdrop of the Japanese Puppet Theater provide a traditional framework to channel responses and shape attitudes to understanding complex human emotions. Behind the thinly veiled autobiographical story of the marital misadventure of Misako and Kaname lies the real theme revealing the conflict of cultures, the old and

PHOTOS 2



the new. While writing about Kaname's attraction to the Caucasian Louise and his feelings for Misako, the narrator confesses:

To keep for a lifetime companion a woman with whom he did not feel half – not a quarter – the delight he felt when he embraced a woman of a different nation and a different race, a woman whom he encountered, so to speak, only at scattered points along the way – surely that was intolerable dislocation.

Tanizaki pursued the “masochistic sexual desires” of the Japanese warlord Musashi in *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* (1935). His next novel, *The Makioka Sisters* (1943-48), about a dying courtly culture, presented the emotional turmoil of the introvert Yukiko, one of the four sisters of an Osaka merchant family, in trying to find a suitable husband. The simple, but perceptive, style is reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence's autobiographical fiction or Andre Gide's psychological tales (Photo 3).

Accepting & Rejecting the West

Tanizaki was undoubtedly fascinated by Western culture. He flirted with the Western community and their lifestyles when he settled on the Yokohama Bluff. His novel *Naomi* was serialized in *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* between March and June 1924 when it was dropped for its sleaziness. After six months it was picked up by another magazine, *Josei*, and saw its completion. It is an interesting story of the Westernization of a 15-year-old girl by a young Japanese man Joji Kawai who is in his late twenties. Naomi is poor while Joji is middle class. As Naomi lives under Joji's guardianship, he decides to make her into his ideal beauty. He conceives her ideal beauty along European lines, and wants her finally to become the new Japanese woman. Naomi possesses typical Eurasian looks and Joji just has to give her a Western hairstyle and clothing, and an English education and English manners, such as social dancing. But as she becomes more Westernized she begins to lead a promiscuous life, finding other young men including foreigners. Nonetheless, as Naomi becomes bolder, the protagonist continues to love her madly. Naomi exploits his masochistic love and has all her whims and fancies fulfilled by him. Joji ends up becoming her slave. Narrated in the first person by Joji, the novel prefigures the emotions and reactions of Tanizaki himself who was struggling with similar feelings *vis-à-vis* his sister-in-law, who was going through the same process of Westernization. In fact Tanizaki took some European dancing lessons from his sister-in-law. *Naomi* reiterates the clash of values and Japan's transition from old to modern. This contradictory feeling of clash-and-transition is poignantly depicted in Tanizaki's works.

Tanizaki's commitment to traditional Japanese culture becomes

PHOTO 3

Photo: Mainichi Newspaper/AFO



Tanizaki writing *The Makioka Sisters*

clear in *The Mother of Captain Shigemoto* (1949-50), a historical novel set in the tumultuous ninth century in Japan. In both *The Reed Cutter* (1932) and *The Mother of Captain Shigemoto* Tanizaki explores the devastating effects of sexual perversity. He constantly endeavors to present states of mind obliquely, in prose that captures the uncertainty of psychological motives. His subtlety reveals truths hidden in the deepest recesses of the psyche. Some of his short stories collected in *Seven Japanese Tales* (1963) cover a period of 50 years from 1910 to 1959. They further underscore his sensitive portrayal of Japanese life and its people. But at the heart of his stories lies a spiritual vacuum, a misunderstanding of the true intention of others.

Most of his characters suffer from isolation and misunderstanding, seeking satisfaction in

their own obsessive erotic desires. The story in *The Key* is symptomatic of the predicament of both husband and wife. Inhibited and secretive in their daily interactions, they decant their erotic desires in their writings, which they secretly read to inflame their passions. The diaries begin a tale of sexual manipulation and deception between the young wife and her 10-year older husband. Passionately in love with her, he lusts for her body and is driven by a foot fetish. As she reads his diary he begins to understand his desire for her and also his jealousy. Though she wants her diary not to be read and even tapes its pages, she nevertheless continues to write even after she discovers that her husband has read it. As the story progresses the entries in the diaries describe the same incident from both points of view. But they do not reveal everything about their intentions to allow freedom for subterfuge and trickery. And this leads to moral degradation, *à la* Oscar Wilde.

All the characters in the story doggedly pursue their own physical gratification and finally get entangled in increasing frustration. The story also reveals how the traditional Japanese family and the values it stands for get caught in the eye of the storm. The double standards of the family help its members to partly gratify their somewhat perverted desires and yet retain the normalcy of a traditionally fortified home. Definitely a spiritual vacuum exists in the relationship between husband and wife which Tanizaki exploits dexterously.

Tanizaki develops the thematic *exposé* through the twin diaries (like a peep show) to perfection. Through the entries of husband and wife, the sexually perverted bohemian male and the sexually insatiable but inhibited female sensibilities are, at times, made to run parallel, and at others to coalesce and clash, altering the consciousness of the reader and prompting him into a new awareness of himself. Truth trembles at the edge of articulation leaving suggestive overtones of romantic yearnings cut short by death. Tanizaki's style minimizes, hesitates, and becomes oblique, leaving enough room for imaginative improvisations by the reader, thereby intensifying the impact of the story.



The story was made into a movie by Kon Ichikawa in 1959 called *Odd Obsession* and then again by Tinto Brass in 1983 called *La Chiave*. Brass used the seductive appeal of actress Stefania Sandrelli in portraying the story set in decadent pre-World War II Venice at the time of Mussolini's rise to power. Japan has been eroticized through Western notions of sex and fantasies and they find confirmation in Tanizaki's short stories meant for the domestic Japanese market. The arrival of Western ideas was delayed in Japan and took still longer to reach the imperial colonies and from there to its peripheries. Most postcolonial theory, especially in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, confirm the flow of Western ideas from colonies to the periphery and *vice versa*, embodied in their concept of the "mutant decoded flux" of desire flowing from the center back to the periphery.

In Praise of Shadows

A brilliant interplay of darkness and light informs the highly charged fabric of Tanizaki's novels. In *The Tattooer*, Seikichi pours his entire passion into making the tattoo of "an enormous female spider" on the girl's back and watches the subtle interplay of light and shade. The image carries notions of beauty, fear and power. It reflects Tanizaki's protest against the banning of tattoos as an art form.

In *The Key* the professor wants to see his wife's beautiful body under the brilliant light of a bed-lamp, while she prefers the night shadows. Her preference for shadows is quite in keeping with the conventional Japanese aesthetics of beauty. By exposing her lubricious body under the harsh glare of fluorescent light he vulgarizes her loveliness. In *In Praise of Shadows* Tanizaki highlights this point:

Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty. Our ancestors made of women an object inseparable from darkness, like lacquer ware decorated in gold or mother-of-pearl. They hid as much of her as they could in shadows, concealing her arms and legs in the folds of long sleeves and skirts, so that one part and one only stood out – her face. The curveless body may, by comparison with Western women, be ugly. But our thoughts do not travel to what we cannot see. The unseen for us does not exist. The person who insists upon seeing her ugliness, like the person who would shine a hundred-candlepower light upon the picture alcove, drives away whatever beauty may reside there.

It would be right to say that Ikuko's beauty exists in shadows, and when the professor places her under the brilliance of "a hundred-

candlepower light" he "drives away whatever beauty may reside there." Though the professor praises the pure whiteness of her beauty, Tanizaki tells us that "Japanese complexion, no matter how white, is tinged by a slight cloudiness;" and even after intense makeup a woman cannot "efface the darkness" that lies "below [her] skin." Tanizaki would like us to believe that the professor lacks a stoic sense of acceptance and contentment in life so very typical of Oriental sensibility and as such he is destroyed.

Conclusion

Frank and bold, Tanizaki's novels race towards a catastrophe that is apparent from the very beginning. Inhabiting a world of desire, ambition and deceit, characters get caught in its darkly neurotic grip. The dark sentiments, seething emotions and fabrication, which normally lie buried under a thick layer of inhibitions and social respectability, suddenly emerge stark naked in the works of Tanizaki. He reveals the terrors and delights of the world of sensations through historical and confessional discourses. He tests the weaknesses of the individual and the family by exposing sexual neurosis, perversions or promiscuity hiding beneath the garb of collective respectability. He underscores the general collapse of values in modern times and the need to restore the balance. But can this balance be restored? In the end, Tanizaki does not seem sure if a restoration is possible. He laments: "No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind. But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the color it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied." He is not even sure if he can keep the secret in his heart. Surely without the reader there cannot be any confession of a secret. And therefore more important than the secret is the sharing of the secret, the vicarious pleasure the reader derives when entering the forbidden territory on a valid ticket provided by the writer himself. Tanizaki's 1963 tanka quoted in the beginning of the essay should be altered to read as follows: *My heart is both mine and yours, it cannot be known by anybody but you and me.* **J.S**

Mukesh Williams is professor of Humanities at Soka University, Japan, and visiting faculty at Keio University-SFC. He has published short stories and poems in *The Copperfield Review* and *The Foliage Oak*, and is co-author of *Representing India* (OUP, 2008).