



## Aesthetics in the Fall of a Geisha House – Mikio Naruse’s *Nagareru*

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### Introduction

Many developing countries, in particular Asian countries, are now undergoing a dramatic transformation toward becoming developed economies. Big cities in Asian nations are seeing significant changes to their landscapes due to rapid urban development. In this process, old buildings and houses are disappearing and being replaced by modern ones or even skyscrapers. Old customs or culture are also being replaced by Westernized ones. Major cities in Asia are often located beside rivers, such as Bangkok on the Chao Phraya River or Delhi on the Yamuna River. A flowing river reminds us of the flow of time, particularly times of drastic socioeconomic change.

The film which I would like to introduce to readers in this issue showcases the flow of the Sumida River in downtown Tokyo in 1956 when Japan was about to embark on economic development in earnest and join the group of developed nations. In 1955, the year before this film was made, the Japanese government published a White Paper on the Japanese Economy that declared the economy was no longer in its postwar economic status – meaning that it had emerged from the crisis caused by the destruction of World War II and was ready to step forward into the next stage of development.

Mikio Naruse (1905-1969) was a well-known movie director in Japan, with nearly 90 films to his credit. His most distinguished films appeared in the 1940s and 1950s, and he is considered one of the great masters of Japanese film of that period together with Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu who all won a global reputation. But it is a pity that Naruse’s works have not become as well known internationally as those of the other three.

The title of his film *Nagareru* is usually translated as “Flowing” in English, but it could be interpreted as “The Flow of Time” in my view. The beginning of the film shows the flowing Sumida River, nostalgic scenes for me, a 64-year-old, since these views have ceased to exist due to the urban development of downtown Tokyo. The film was premiered at the Japanese National Art Festival in 1956 and it is easy to see why given the many beautiful scenes in the film.

### Background & Story

The film was based on a novel written by Aya Koda (1904-1990). It was published in 1955 and immediately made into a film by Naruse,

who made a number of films based on works of Japanese literature, including *The Sound of the Mountain* by Nobel Prize winner Yasunari Kawabata. The view of the flowing Sumida River at the beginning of the film seems to symbolize the flow of time, washing away all kinds of human emotions – love, hatred, sadness, joy – as well as the history of human civilization, its prosperity and decline.

The story is about a geisha house in the Yanagibashi district of downtown Tokyo, a well-known entertainment quarter that flourished from the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century. But the business of geisha houses had declined rapidly by the middle of the 1950s, since the music and dance and songs with which geisha had long entertained their customers were not much appreciated by those who had now grown accustomed to more Westernized lifestyles and values. In the film, the house owned by Tsutayo, the heroine of the film and once a very reputable geisha and skillful shamisen player, falls into a state of catastrophe. Some of her geisha girls quit their jobs and the financial situation of the house becomes critical.

The uncle of one of the geisha who quit the house attempts to blackmail Tsutayo, saying she should pay compensation for having forced the girl to work in poor conditions and at low wages, which was not necessarily the case. But being so menaced by this man, Tsutayo has to borrow money from an acquaintance with the help of an ex-colleague who married the owner of an expensive luxury restaurant in order to pay such compensation. Her debts reach a considerable amount but continue to increase. The trouble between Tsutayo and the girl’s uncle is finally referred to the police, but the Japanese consider an incident involving the police as a big scandal, and this is a further threat to her business.

Tsutayo finally decides to sell the house to her ex-colleague who helped her borrow the money, and with the proceeds from the sale of the house she pays all her debts. She then decides to continue to work as a geisha while being a tenant of the house, as she retains her pride in her musical talent.

This is a sad story of women left behind by the transition of society toward further modernization and Westernization. Geisha ceased to be popular not only for economic reasons but also due to a change in values among young Japanese women at that time. Tsutayo’s daughter, Katsuyo, does not like geisha entertaining mainly male customers and wants to work independently without having to depend upon men. Thus she is not so interested in marriage. She talks about

her views on marriage, geisha and men while walking with Mr. Saeki, a young man who appears to like her, beside the Sumida River. So the river emerges in the film again in a scene where new thoughts come in to replace old thoughts.

And then there is the maid Haru, a middle-aged widow who works for Tsutayo's geisha house. The model for her is Aya Koda herself, as the author based her novel on her own brief experience of working for a geisha house as a maid. Haru watches everything that happens to the geisha house as an observer. The last scene of the film is rather shocking, as the new owner of the house, Tsutayo's ex-colleague, confidentially tells Haru that she will give up the geisha house, which has little prospect of being a successful business, and turn it into a luxury Japanese restaurant – meaning Tsutayo will have to move to another place or even quit being a geisha. The film comes to an end without her being informed of this and does not describe her life thereafter, merely implying a harsher reality for Tsutayo ahead.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagareru\\_poster.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagareru_poster.jpg)



A 1956 Japanese movie poster for the film *Nagareru*

## Aesthetic Effects

The film includes many beautiful scenes of geisha wearing kimono, of musical and dance performances by geisha and their apprentices, of children playing with fireworks on a summer evening, and of men and women dressed in *yukata*. We do not often see such sights in downtown Tokyo anymore, as the old culture is being washed away. But the film successfully catches the radiance of these dying embers like the glow of sunset, embodied in Tsutayo who, despite suffering so many misfortunes and difficulties, does not lose her dignity as a first-class geisha. Her elegant demeanor conveys a sense that beauty matters more in life than material success.

This heroine was played in the film by Isuzu Yamada, also well known for her role in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Haru was played by Kinuyo Tanaka, another well-known actress, who also appeared in one of Mizoguchi's masterpieces, *Sansho dayu* (*Sansho the Bailiff*, 1954), while Katsuyo, Tatsuyo's daughter, was played by Hideko Takamine, who also played the heroine in Naruse's 1955 film *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*).

It is sad to see traditional culture dying, but in such sadness you can see the aesthetics of people in decline. The flow of a river reminds us of the flow of time and makes us miss what we have lost or are about to lose. This must be a universal sentiment. So I think this film by Naruse would be well understood by people everywhere, and especially in nations facing rapid Westernization and the decline of their own culture. It is also a valuable historical document on the history of Tokyo in the early 1950s, as it preserves views of the old downtown area of the city, which makes it an important cultural heritage.

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