

A Tale of Two Indian Rivers in Japanese Fiction

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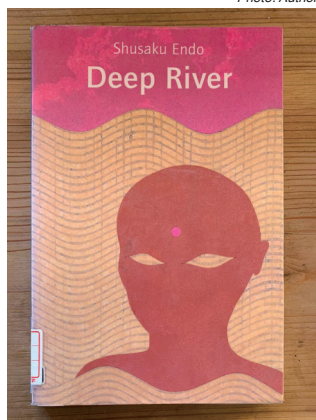
When rivers occupy the imagination of a novelist, they symbolize a voyage, goal, great cleansing, death, or resolution. Rivers often become the central symbols in a novel around which most of the action takes place. In Japanese novels there are few occasions when rivers in a foreign land become powerful symbols of redemption and confusion. Shusaku Endo's novel *Deep River* (1993) and Yuka Ishii's 2017 novel *Hyakunen doro* (*A Hundred Years' Mud*) are separated by over two decades; they nevertheless share a common theme – the spiritual purification and physical chaos of Indian rivers. There is no comparison between the Ganga River (the Sanskrit name for the river known as the Ganges in English) and the Adyar River, but both enter the Bay of Bengal. The first is 3,000 kilometers long, while the second is only 42.5 km long. The rich symbolism and spirituality of the Ganga River are overpowering and tower over the muddy chaos of the Adyar. Obviously what Endo can do with the Ganga River in his novel, Ishii cannot do with the Adyar in hers. Endo's shows moments of realization in his Japanese characters as they encounter the Ganga River, while Ishii shows the chaos and confusion which arises with the flooding of Adyar. Endo's realistic style of capturing the slow-moving past and the fast-moving present imitates the slow turbidity and the fast-flowing waters of the Ganga River. Ishii uses flashbacks, capturing present events but breaks both logic and realism. The semi-autobiographical element and unrelated events roped into the story can only be explained through what we call today magical realism. Endo creates epiphanies through his realism,

while Ishii introduces short intensities through her magical realism. These two pictures of India, through two rivers, present to us entirely different pictures of the country. An understanding of the local Indian vernaculars is never an issue with Endo, but Ishii presents the Tamil reality in its different nuances. Endo chooses the ancient city of Varanasi for his novel, which gives his characters a spiritual anchor and develops in them a constant awareness of death.

Endo reveals the different cultural perspectives of urban materialism and urban spirituality. In Ishii, Chennai offers a disembodied identity of mud and artifacts of a century interspersed with experiences of college teaching.

Japanese Literary Representation of India

Though the connection between Japan and India is 1,300 years old, modern Japanese writers seldom explore Indo-Japanese themes in their writings. The philosophical dimensions of India are available to Japanese writers who understand that when an individual overcomes his self-centeredness, he can unite with the universe and become one with every creature in it. There are occasional representations of India as a land of wisdom and chaos. Japanese writers like Tenjiku Tokubei (1612-1692) saw India as *tenjiku*, while Kakuzo Okakura alias Tenshin (1863-1913) talked about the connection between India and Japan as part of the Asiatic Mind. Okakura placed India at its center though he gave a prominent place to China, and a smaller place to Japan, Southern islands, and Europe. In his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903) Okakura introduces the phrase "Asia is One". The slogan fuses Chinese Confucianism and Indian Vedantic thought and explains the "Ultimate and Universal" in life. The idea of the "ultimate" is part of Confucian thought which preaches that we should live with others and become happy. Japanese writers such as Rohan Koda and Yukio Mishima



Deep River by Shusaku Endo



Fukui Kawa (Deep River) by Shusaku Endo



Hyakunen doro by Yuka Ishii

have explored these themes directly or indirectly.

Life-Giving Quality of the Ganga River

Obviously, the title of the novel, *Deep River*, refers to the Ganga River, and its great spiritual ramifications in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The word “deep” may refer to the inexhaustible perspectives the river offers and the way it has been cherished by Indians over centuries. Endo explores the life-giving and life-negating nature of the Ganga River which the characters in the story understand to varying degrees. The Ganga River has the power to provide self-knowledge (*atma gyan*), reincarnation (*punarjanam*) or the cessation of the cycle of birth and death (*moksha*). Endo explores the various aspects of incarnation, reincarnation, and self-knowledge.

Endo's novel is set against the backdrop of the Hindu-Sikh riots in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination. It brings into focus the trouble-ridden history of post-independent India. *Deep River* became his last story before his death and dealt with five Japanese characters going to India on a self-exploratory journey. Tourists do touristy things. But these are not just tourists with a camera, but a bunch of spiritual enthusiasts disappointed with Japanese society looking for meaning in life. Undoubtedly, Sanjo is a cameraman, but he is on a honeymoon. He is more interested in the affairs of the world than in other-worldly pursuits. Endo provides a tour guide in the character of Enami, who has understood India well and is willing to offer his help. Endo converted to Roman Catholicism at an early age and studied French literature at Keio University. He wanted to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern religious traditions. Over the years he became disappointed with Japan's rejection of Christianity. The self-exploration reflected in his characters could be a way to address his own spiritual loss and disappointment with Japan.

A Journey of Self-Realization to India

All the characters in *Deep River* are knit together with the common theme of a tour. Their tour is not a tour of the city of Varanasi or an escape from Tokyo, but a tour of their inner strengths and weaknesses as individuals. The tour of self-discovery becomes a metaphor for a spiritual quest which India offers. It is not a tour in the traditional sense, but a journey, a journey of self-exploration and self-realization. One character goes to find the reincarnation of his wife, while another goes to see the pristine beauty of a bird

sanctuary in Agra and Bharatpur. There are others who are trying to find lost love, help humanity or fulfill a vow. As the story progresses, the Ganga River acquires deeper significance of a “great mother” and endorses the theme of the novel.

The main character, Isobe, cannot come to terms with the death of his wife Keiko. He cannot accept his lonely existence. He cannot believe that the “strangely pallid fragments of bone strewn in the box were those of his wife”. Before her death, his wife extracts a promise from him: “I ... I know for sure ... I'll be reborn somewhere in this world. Look for me ... find me ... promise ... promise!” Isobe takes her delirious entreaties seriously. It develops in him a quest to find her reincarnation. What better place to go to than India? Looking for his dead wife's reincarnation in India, Isobe finds a small girl in a village who claims to have a Japanese past. Isobe not only fulfills his vow to his wife but also discovers a purpose in life.

Vivacious Mitsuko is another character who is on this tour of Varanasi. She is rich and beautiful, but divorced and disappointed. She carries within her heart a “hollowness” that cannot be filled. Obviously, she is looking for something, but she does not know what she wants: “Just what the hell is it I want?” She has a streak of compassion and takes care of Isobe's wife ailing in hospital. Mitsuko begins to identify herself with the fate of the heroine in the French novel *Therese Desqueyroux* (1927) by Francois Mauriac. As a university student she gets attracted to a Japanese man, Otsu, who wants to become a Christian priest. Otsu has strange eclectic beliefs. He is both pantheistic and Christian and becomes attracted to Indian animism. Not only for Otsu, but also for Endo, it is hard to reconcile Christian and Hindu beliefs. The rituals of death through burial and cremation are hard to reconcile. Otsu is fascinated by floating the dead in the Ganga River – “the river, as always, silently flowed by. The river cared nothing about the corpses that would eventually be burned and scattered into itself, or about the unmoving male mourners who appeared to cradle their heads under their arms. It was evident here that death was simply a part of nature.” The acceptance of death as “part of nature” is so easy to understand by the banks of the Ganga River. Mitsuko finds Otsu by the Ganga taking care of sick and dying Indians. She puts on a sari and follows the voice of a man to take a dip in the river. As the waters of the Ganga River envelop her, she realizes “there is a river of humanity. ... I feel as though I've started to understand what I was yearning for through all the many mistakes of my past.” At last, she realizes the sense of completion and purification the river provides. She begins to “understand” her longings and accept the “mistakes” of her past.

The Deep Ganga River

The Ganga River becomes a symbol of life, love, and purification depending on the way each character approaches it. Each of the spiritual tourists discovers the true meaning of love through the river. They understand how the water of the river manifests itself in nature, the human body and beyond. Becoming one with the Ganga River means to be purified and liberated. The Ganga River is deep because it is for all. Mitsuko sums up the meaning of the river by saying, “It’s a deep river, so deep I feel as though it’s not just for the Hindus but for everyone.”

There are other characters who understand their negative karma and seek forgiveness. Numada writes stories about animals and has a myna for a pet. Once during surgery his heart stopped, but it revived. However, through these processes his pet myna died. Numada believes that the myna took over his karma and sacrificed its life for him: “I wonder if it died in place of me?” The connection between human and animal life is the essence of the cosmic oneness of life.

Another character goes to India to find a spiritual power that animates the universe. Kiguchi wants a memorial for those who fought with him in Burma. He feels it is possible to alleviate the suffering of others through compassion. Kiguchi’s friend Tsukada was involved in cannibalism during the war. But an American intern assured Tsukada that God would forgive him for his crime. This assurance helped Tsukada to alleviate his suffering – it “had been made possible because Gaston had soaked up all the anguish in Tsukada’s heart”. Gaston’s act is a great act of compassion. Kiguchi finally chants a sutra for his deceased comrades and fulfills his promise. They find their own moments of self-realization through the Ganga River.

Mud & Floods of Chennai

Hyakunen doro (A Hundred Years’ Mud) is based on the floods in Chennai in 2015 that caused widespread devastation in the city. Wading through the floods and mud, the protagonist discovers not only the history of the city but her own history and the city of Osaka, where she was born. The floods and mud of Chennai, a southern town in India, are introduced in the cauldron of magic realism. The first-person narration helps the writer to delve into her life easily. The narrator is also a *sensei* who follows the same profession as that of the writer. The narrator witnesses a rare flood in Chennai. “Perhaps I can call myself a lucky fellow who has faced a flood of one in a

hundred years only after three months and a half of spending life in Chennai. The previous day it rained heavily throughout the day. In the afternoon I had my students go back after finishing class early; the next morning when I opened the window, I found everything around my apartment turned into a coffee color river.” An opportune presence of being an eyewitness gives authenticity to the narrative.

The Adyar River floods, something that has not happened in 100 years. It becomes a propitious moment for the protagonist to be present on the scene when this event is taking place. The flooding throws up mud, artifacts, and memories that become the staple of the story. The mud from the river not only creates chaos but becomes the very material of the story. Ishii writes: “In the middle of the bridge there is a wide driveway. The pavements run alongside it on both right and left. The mountain of mud was raised one meter in width, 50 centimeters high, and continues from one end to another of the concrete bridge which is more than 500 meters long. Such view explains the mud that the bridge unavoidably received when the river overflowed. Having a flood after one hundred years means the release of flotsam and jetsam, which was embraced by the river over a century. Now it has seen the sunlight.”

The flooding of the bridge and the streets releasing buried mud knits the story together. The story stretches fact and fiction to encapsulate the magic of flooding in a foreign land. The narrator admits that there are linguistic difficulties of interpreting information where natives speak Tamil, but English comes to her aid: “Since I cannot speak Tamil, I have to use English as an intermediate language, at least until students reach the level to understand the class with simple Japanese explanations. So, I need to think about grammar and words, explanations in English in advance.” The frankness of the narrator gives plausibility to the story.

The forte of the story is the way it captures the lived life experience of teaching Japanese for a few months in Chennai and witnessing the Adyar River flooding. Certain life and death incidents intensify the moments, especially when a woman in a yellow sari pulls out a boy from the mud. Ishii writes: “... A lady in her forties in a yellow sari, walking right in front of me, suddenly pushed her right hand into the mountain of mud and said, ‘Oh my god, here I found!’ Loudly screaming, she pulled it out with one hand and with the other threw water on it from the puddle simultaneously. When she wiped it with her neck scarf, it was a boy of about five years old.” The drama of finding a boy in the mud is palpable.

A Female Writer's Perspective of India

The flood allows disparate elements to be knit together, from personal experiences of a Japanese woman in India teaching Japanese through English to a memorial coin revealing its own history. This kind of story captures the raw personal experience that gives intensity to the tale. The novel won the 2018 Akutagawa Prize which Eimi Yamada calls a “collage pulled out from the mud in a foreign land” (158th Selector’s Comment).

The story has a loose structure based on the flood that spreads mud in the streets of Chennai. The rich fly to work with electronic contraptions, but the poor and non-working people dig the mud in the hope of finding something of value. A boy finds an Osaka Expo 1970 memorial coin in the form of a pendant. The coin begins to speak, telling the life history of Devraj. An elderly lady digs her ex-fiancé from the mud and shares her regret with him; he consoles her. There are also many voices which speak from the mud apologizing to their families and friends. There is another old lady crying bitterly while holding a beautiful boy freshly dug out of the mud. The use of magic realism breaks logic and destabilizes cause and effect. However, the style expresses the mindless activity of the city and the absurdity of the human condition. This allows the writer to shift the narrative from the uniqueness and chaos of India to the modern history of Japan and her lived experiences in Osaka. The use of magic realism provides a wider perspective without paying special attention to chronology which a realistic novel will demand. It leaves the protagonist with no inner questioning or self-awareness, as is evident in Endo’s *Deep River*. The writer finds no reason to explore the realistic mode deeply, as the realistic structure of the flood holds the novel together. Obviously, the use of magic realism creates unrelated episodes which leave the plot directionless. The insertion of the speaking Olympic medal could have been exploited more thoroughly to enrich the twin symbols of mud and flood which sustain the characters. Ishii’s story reflects a direct experience of lived life in India. It presents a unique perspective by a Japanese female writer immersed in a working Indian life.

Episodes Connected Through Magic Realism

Ishii uses the genre of magic realism to weave wondrous stories into the main narrative, making it half-real and half-imagined. For example, the story of Indians flying and commuting to work using the latest technology connects other activities released by the flood. Ishii writes: “... the confusion of the transportation and main roads in

Chennai during peak time was beyond my imagination; for example, the company’s executives commute by flying to avoid the peak time. Now, after I started living in Chennai, it has become a common sight for me.” Accepting the impossible with the possible is the hallmark of the story.

The story is made interesting when the writer introduces the incident of an exchange of *maneki neko* or a beckoning cat and Ganesha between Osaka city and Chennai. The use of such literary devices leads readers to a wondrous world. Ishii adds new stories within a larger narrative to give a diffused sense of mystery. At the end of the story there is a suggestion of a world beyond our world. There are persons who go beyond the clouds and acquire tremendous power to become objects of worship. In Ishii, objects reveal their mysteries. The medal dug out by her student Devraj for punishment for a traffic violation speaks to the narrator about how its life was. Ishii writes: “This is not a usual voice. Intuitively I understood it, that it was not a creation of his vocal cords’ vibration, as it was faint and subtle, just like mist on the surface of a river, without anyone around on a rainy afternoon; the message quietly steams in my heart. It rang as follows: ‘A certain period of my childhood I was traveling around regions with my father most of the year on a mini truck which has a cage of a bear on it’.” The story ends with the protagonist getting off the bridge: “While answering (Devraj), I almost missed my footing. Without realizing I had reached the last step. The bridge ended. I jumped off the step; the left side is my company.”

The two novels are not tales of two rivers but two cities both ancient and modern; they are cities filled with their own histories. Endo imbues the Ganga River with a religious and personal philosophy, while Ishii captures the stark reality of mud and floods based on personal experience. However, the dominating presence of the Ganga River in Varanasi cannot be matched by that of the Adyar River in Chennai. The Ganga River dominates the imagination of both Indians and Japanese. The powerful representations of the two cities also leave a strong impression in the mind of the reader. Both writers in their own unique ways capture a slice of life from India. They reveal their own understanding of India by exploring the motif of a journey based on personal experience.

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