Japanese Literary Encounters with India

Author Mukesh Williams

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Japanese writers have been overwhelmed by the chaos and life-generating principle of Buddhist tales, Hindu myths, and big rivers. Their tone is often eulogistic, sad, chaotic, or reverential. Japanese writers approach the Indian reality from a distance yet wish to catch its essence. Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) was fascinated by the Indian concepts of karma and rebirth. Naka Kansuke (1885-1965) explored themes of love and rebirth. Shusaku Endo (1923-1996) concentrated on the painful spirituality of the Ganges. The impact of Buddhist and Brahminical traditions has been profound on the literary imagination of Japanese writers. What comes out in their writings are images of India that are magical, strange, or reverential.

Mishima's Religion of the Blood

Mishima's tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* (1965-1970) deals with the themes of reincarnation, early death, and the doomed karma of a young aristocratic man, Kiyoaki Matsugae, who develops an intense and mixed personality. India figures in some of Mishima's novels as theme, structure, symbolism, and mysticism. His short visit to India gives him the authenticity his Japanese readers need for his engagement with Indian society. But Mishima's engagement is highly selective. He is interested in dealing with big events that are mesmeric and draw out deep emotions, often contradictory. His characters are pulled into rituals with a force they do not comprehend and feel bewildered waiting at the edge of a new awakening. Mishima was fascinated with the religion of the blood, as seen in his novel *Patriotism* (1961), where the young couple Lieutenant Takeyama and his wife, Reiko, perform a double suicide *(shinju)*. He sublimated love and duty through his religion of the blood. When Mishima observed animal sacrifices in India, his belief in the religion of the blood was endorsed. His engagement with Indian society is rather superficial. The Indian characters do not come alive. They are part of a crowd that is raucous, filthy, and dark. Shusaku Endo is more involved with creating rounded characters, but they fit into his imaginative scheme that helps to advance his stories.

Mishima uses India both as a physical landscape and a spiritual journey to gain a philosophical perspective on the twin themes of life and death. He visited India in 1967 for nearly a month at the invitation of the Indian government and visited Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi, Kali Puja at Kalighat, a goat sacrifice at Calcutta, and rock painting at the Ajanta and Ellora caves in Aurangabad. He witnessed the serene calm of the Buddhist caves and the intense cremation rituals of Manikarnika Ghat to understand samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth. The four reincarnations of Kiyoaki Matsugae are seen through the eyes of Shigekuni Honda, who in his deep friendship wants to save his friend from early death but sacrifices his own life in the process. In the first novel, *Spring Snow* (1969), the protagonist is born under his own name. In the second, *Runaway Horses* (1969), he is born as Isao Iinuma, a fiery nationalist. In the third, *The Temple of Dawn* (1970; Tuttle 1979), he gets reincarnated into a Thai princess called Ying Chand, while in the fourth, *The Decay of the Angel* (1971), he arrives as an orphan under the name Toru Yasunaga. However, each transmigration carries retributions of their own unresolved karma. This is hard for Honda to fathom. The tetralogy delves into Buddhist themes of successive reincarnations, early death, transience of beauty, and karmic retribution. For the sake of novelistic convenience, Mishima's tetralogy covers a period from 1912 to 1975, a span of 63 years, which could be the life span of a normal human being. But Kiyoaki Matsugae's early death in each of the four successive novels allows the writer to give the stories a semblance of chronological order. Kiyoaki shows a deep affection and indifference towards Satoko Ayakura until his death due to a sudden bout of pneumonia at the age of 20. Kiyoaki is still growing up emotionally, and his self-centeredness comes in the way of his loving Satoko unconditionally. The histories of the two families and Kiyoaki's own intense emotions create the propulsion of the stories intertwined together.

Mishima presents India as a land of the unknown, which "defies the imagination". His visits to the burning ghats in Varanasi, Kali worship in Calcutta, and the Ajanta caves in Aurangabad carry powerful experiences for Honda, impressed by Kali worship and the decapitation of a bleating goat to appease her bloodthirsty character. "The festival-goers, accustomed to the sight, did not even turn around, and holiness with its dirty hands and feet sat confidently in their midst. This great mother goddess of the earth imparts to all female deities throughout the world her sublimity as mother, her feminine voluptuousness, and her abominable cruelty, thereby enriching their divine nature." Kali finds a reference in Shusaku Endo's *The Deep River* as well, where Mitsuko is both attracted and repelled by the goddess Kali, carrying symbolism beyond its presence.

In *The Temple of Dawn*, Honda is haunted by the city of Benaras, where he witnessed scenes of animal sacrifices, extreme filth, and divine purity. "Benares was a city of extreme filth as well as extreme holiness. On both sides of the narrow, sunless alleys, stalls for fried

food and cakes, astrologers, grain and flour vendors were all crowded together; and the area was filled with stench, dampness and disease." The Buddhist caves at Ajanta possess a serene quiet and peace unrivaled by any place in India. The noise, filth, flies, and "black" people were inescapable. Inside the dark and musty caves, the Buddha was seated in a lotus posture. Looking at him, Honda experienced emptiness. India was a place where Honda finds that "the source of everything that seemed heartless was connected with a hidden, gigantic awesome joy! Honda was afraid of grasping such delight. But having witnessed the extremes he had, he knew that he should never recover from the shock." India haunts him in his sleep and disturbs him into a new awakening.

Kansuke Naka's Introspective Style

Kansuke Naka was deeply influenced by the *Jataka Tales* dealing with rebirth and karma, similar to Mishima but with a difference. Naka pointed out that actions in the present life of a human being create the condition for future existence. Most of his writings have not been translated because they possess limited appeal to non-Japanese readers. His works carry a highly evocative and introspective style dealing with the daily life of the Meiji and Taisho eras. As a disciple of Natsume Soseki, Naka locates his works in the emotive responses of his characters to ordinary events and myths that have limited appeal to a modern reader. At the University of Tokyo, Soseki taught and introduced Naka to modern literary techniques and the psychosocial realm of the novel. The focus in the novels on the psychological development of characters is reminiscent of Soseki. His coming-of-age novel *The Silver Spoon: Memoir of a Boyhood in Japan (gin no saji)*, published in 1913, focuses on the development of a boy from childhood into adolescence, revealing the lifestyle and manners of late Meiji society. In a letter to *Asahi Shimbun*, Natsume Soseki praised the novel for its "freshness and dignity" but pointed out that it does not have "much drama *(henka)* or development *(shinten)*". His subsequent works, like *Rokan* (1935), *Wildgans* (1933), and *Bird Stories* (1943), carry the freshness and psychological limitations that Soseki pointed out.

Naka's evocative novel *The Shade of the Bodhi Tree* (*Bodaiju-no kage*, 1932) was written for his daughter when she was young but was completed when she herself had become a mother with a child of her own. The novel carries a dark psychological appeal that transcends time. Located in India, the story reveals the psychological angst of a father, a daughter, and her lover trying to transcend death, resulting in tragic consequences. The father, Narada, an unskilled sculptor, finds an apprentice, Purna, who far exceeds his skills. The apprentice falls in love with the sculptor's beautiful daughter, Churananda, but she dies. He brings her back through her likeness in stone. With a little help from the god of death, Yama, the apprentice-lover yearns to discover a paradise with her, but to no avail. The tragic consequences of reversing the order of the world allow the

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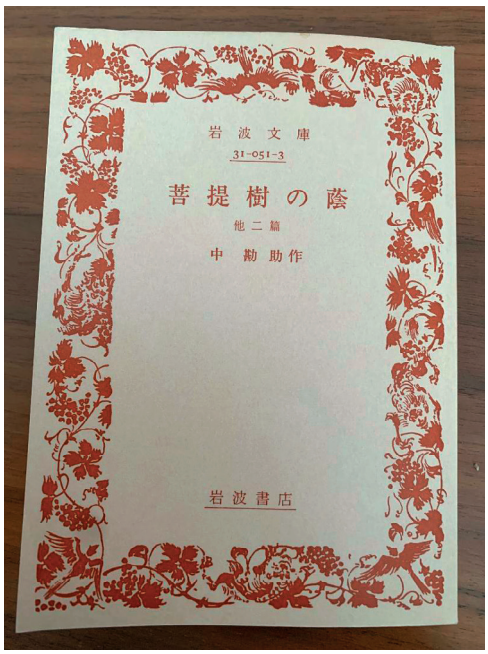


Front page of Bodaiju no kage *by Naka Kensuke*

writer to delve into a dark psychological web of rejection, revenge, and failure. Using the images of the Bodhi tree and the moon, Naka transforms them into symbols of enlightenment, femininity, and death. In a world of uncertainty and an overflow of information, readers are once more looking for stories that reflect their inner chaos and anxiety. Naka's highly evocative work reveals the psychological struggles of his characters when desires are not fulfilled.

The story has a complex plot that takes the reader from Amravati to Kalingapatnam, about 1,000 kilometers. The third-person narration controls information and creates suspense. When the Churananda returns to life, she forgets about her past life and rejects Purna, who disappointedly roams the country from Amravati to the Krishna River and the Godavari till he reaches Kalingapatnam. In the beginning of the story the sun shines along the river. Most of the daily activities of life are conducted – from talking to falling in love under the Bodhi tree. However, once the god of death Yama enters the picture, granting a boon of bringing back the dead Churananda, the scene shifts. It brings out the struggles of the characters, especially Purna; seven years go by. The stipulated time for Churananda to return to the world of the dead arrives. Purna finds his daughter Piplana and ties her up to a tree near Churananda's house. Churananda discovers the girl and recognizes her. Purna yearns for death, as he has no purpose in life. There seems to be no change in him, and he dies a miserable death – unfulfilled and unloved. Pursuing selfish desires often leads to tragedy. The characters in the story now get connected to the moon and therefore must return to the moon when their time is up. The moon becomes

Photo: author

Ganges Sangam Allahabad

the expression of another world. It forebodes a passage from one world to another. The story taps into the folktale of Kaguya-hime, who comes from the moon and must return to the moon once people from there come to fetch her. Similarly, *The Shade of the Bodhi Tree* ends with the full moon illuminating the garden. An owl, a messenger of Yama, hoots as if calling them to another world. Meanwhile, through a locket on her daughter Piplana's neck, Churananda recognizes her past life. But all this is rather late. Churananda, Piplana, and Purna are dead, taken away by the god of death during the full moon. The moon itself becomes the active agent of transformation. The story ends with the following description: "Morning arrived. They found Piplana dead, locked in a tight embrace, her lips still at Churananda's breast as she lay stretched upon the chair. And there, in the shade of that Bodhi tree, Purna was discovered lifeless, leaning against the trunk." The story brings out the tragic consequences of playing with the way existence is organized. It also shows a literary sensibility of the way Buddhism was understood in Japan.

Naka possessed a deep understanding of Indian culture and the way it was interpreted in Japan. He uses India as a motif to connect the names and places of characters to the central theme. After reading the story, the reader becomes aware of the disastrous consequences of pursuing egoistical goals.

Shusaku Endo and the Power of River Ganges

Unlike Naka, Shusaku Endo is fascinated with Hindu myths and the purifying power of the River Ganges. When Endo's *Deep River* (1993/2000, Tuttle: London) was published, he did not have very many years to live. With a Christian upbringing and a Buddhist sensibility, Endo was torn between a belief in a Christian God and a cosmic force operating in the universe. He witnessed the suffering of his mother caused by two desertions and at times imagined her sometimes as the clean femininity of the Virgin Mary and at others as the afflicted maternity of the goddess Chamunda. *Deep River* carries the "scars" of his mother's suffering and his spiritual dichotomy.

Deep River begins with five Japanese men and women embarking on a physical and spiritual journey to India. Carrying the burden of their sordid past from Japan and elsewhere, they visit Indian temples, observe its society, and end on the shores of the River Ganges. The reader is introduced to Osamu Isobe, who has seen his wife, Keiko, die in hospital. Here he meets Mitsuko Naruse, a young nurse who takes care of his ailing wife. But before her death she realizes that her life is eternal through an esoteric whispering from a 200-year-old ginkgo tree. She is convinced that she will be reborn. She extracts a promise from Isobe that he will find her reincarnation. It so happens that a young Indian girl claims that in her previous life she was a Japanese woman. Isobe decides to go to India to investigate.

Mitsuko is more sinned against than sinning. She is trying to find herself through relationships and religion. She confesses, "I'm just a chaotic woman who doesn't understand herself very well." She gets married, divorced, and works in a hospital but remains lonely, looking for something. She seduces a Catholic seminarian, Otsu, compelling him to renounce his belief in Christ by trampling on a statue of suffering Christ, but he refuses. She develops a "childish desire to make fun not of Otsu, but of the God in whom he believed." She imagines herself as Eve possessing an "impulsive desire to destroy herself". Mitsuko pursues him through France and India. At the end of the novel, both meet once again on the shores of the Ganges. Here Otsu tries to mediate between two rival Indian groups and is severely wounded. The story ends with him in hospital fighting for life. The fourth character, Kiguchi, survives in the jungles of Burma during World War II with the help of his friend Tsukada by eating dead comrades. Both suffer from guilt. Tsukada dies

Photo: author

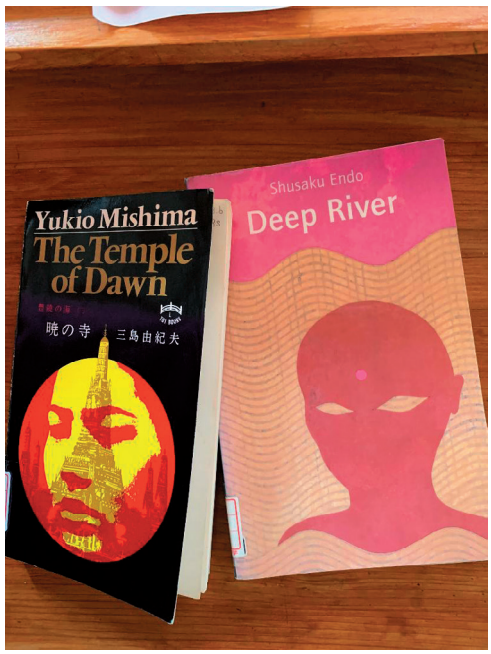
Ganges at Varanasi Ghat

peacefully while Kiguchi travels to India to atone for his sins. At Manikarnika Ghat, Kiguchi chanted passages from the Amida Sutra and "saw the faces of the dead soldiers on the Highway of Death, those lying prone on the ground and those with their faces turned to the sky." Beside him, "large black-eyed" Mitsuko stood still as white smoke meandered over the waters. Finally, Endo introduces an ornithologist, Numada, who wants to visit bird sanctuaries in India. Numada is a children's story writer but carries a troubled past. Raised in Dalian, Japanese-occupied Manchuria, he has seen his parents quarreling loudly at night. During such moments he would seek solace from his dog Blackie, who would respond by wagging his tail as if saying, *"Can't be helped. That's what life's all about."* Once an old man gave Numada an African hornbill whose loneliness endeared him to Numada. In his mind birds become an embodiment of Christ: "It is a strange metaphor to compare such a bird with Jesus, but Numada had his reasons for doing so." He always wrote about children's interaction with animals, but looking at the "massive banyan trees" in India, he decides to write about trees and children. All these five characters are troubled by their past and seek atonement in "the great mother Ganges".

The river continues to fascinate the Japanese characters. At Dashashvamedha Ghat, they descend the steps dodging beggars and encounter the Ganges. "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 in their arms. It was evident here that death was simply a part of nature." Mitsuko is not interested in Buddhist sites; they did not "suit her fancy". She is more interested in Hinduism, "in which purity and defilement, holiness and obscenity, and charity and brutality mingled and coexisted. She was grateful for even one extra day to stay beside the river where all things intermixed rather than having to go see the sites that had been sanctified by the Buddha." Mitsuko is fascinated by the "deathlike Indian night", a night "lacquered in a black so absolute it would be unthinkable in Japan". Towards the end of the story Mitsuko prays but does not know to whom her prayer is directed, whether to Otsu's God or some cosmic force. *"I have learned, though, that there is a river of humanity. Though I still don't know what lies at the end of that flowing river. But I feel as though I've started to understand what I was yearning for through all the many mistakes of my past... I believe that the river embraces these people and carries them away. A river of humanity. The sorrows of this deep river of humanity. And I am a part of it."* Through the prayer she comes closer to her heart's ultimate need.

Endo's characters encounter the deep and inescapable reality of the River Ganges, where "life and death coexisted in harmony". The river transforms them. Endo mixes Hindu moksha with Christian love, giving a new twist to the symbolic significance of the Ganges as an abiding icon. In endorsing Christian femininity and Hindu shakti, Endo tries to bring together two incommensurable worlds. His personal and Indian experiences and those of his characters in *Deep River* heighten this incommensurability. Travel to India becomes both a recompense and a rebirth. Endo's stories carry intense emotions that traverse the uncertain paths of forgiveness and renewal, culminating in an awareness of the significance of life.

Photo: author



Front covers of Mishima's The Temple of Dawn and Endo's Deep River

The literary encounters between modern Japanese writers and the reality of India are impressive. From the time of Okakura Tenshin to Yoko Ishii, the chaos, smells, milling crowds, and the bold iconography of gods and goddesses have had a haunting impact on their sensibility. The rivers, temples, and religious icons amaze them. Mishima, Naka, and Endo use the Brahminical and Buddhist traditions to create novels. For them, India exists in religious conventions, literary traditions, and personal visits to the country. They transform these traditions to create a mystical world that gives a new literary experience. They see India as a spiritual land that must be encountered to acquire a better understanding of the purpose of human existence and the meaning of life.

Quotes from Naka Kansuke's novel *Bodaiju-no kage* were translated by Ui Teramoto. JS

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