

# Reflections on Literary Japan



Author Mukesh Williams

By Mukesh Williams

Japan is a beautiful country. Its landscape is picturesque; its literature is surprisingly honest; and its people are polite. When I came to Tokyo in the mid-1990s on a short teaching assignment, every aspect of Japanese literature and society fascinated me. I never realized that I would spend the rest of my life in this country and become deeply influenced by its literature, landscape and people.

Before coming to Japan, I had read some of its iconic literature and realized that the Japanese did not enjoy writing long epics or narratives as much as Europeans or Indians did. Their strength lay in short essays and verses. They just followed the impulse of the brush or the *zuihitsu* technique. They wrote novels with poetic intensity and plays in colloquial idioms. Their writing looked for experience, not style. They chose to write about feelings of love, connection with nature and beauty fading. The Japanese literary sensibility was quite distinct from my experience and therefore it had a deep impact on my writing.

## Mind & Object

The first impact on my literary sensibility was Matsuo Basho. His well-crafted haiku, his wanderings along the narrow streets of Tokyo, and his Zen surprises filled my mind and assuaged my anxieties. Basho did not conflate experience but removed the distance between



Stone Monument of Basho's Hut (Bashoan)

mind and object to discover its essential nature. The idea of concentration or *dhayana* was available to me through my training in Vedic and Buddhist traditions. Touching the flow of experience beyond body and mind through language was quite exciting to me. I had never found Basho's tight control of language in the works of any European or Indian writer.

In the spring of 1686, Basho could write an amusing verse or haiku, carrying a single impression in just 17 syllables. Basho lived in a small cottage by the Sumida River in Tokyo. The cottage was built by his students. He must have been familiar with the habits of frogs. Like a Zen master, Basho acquired the ability to encapsulate a single moment in a haiku. He responded to the stillness, sound and silence of nature through his famous frog haiku.

*fu-ru ik-e ya  
ka-wa-zu to-bi ko-mu  
mi-zu no o-to*

an old pond  
a frog jumps in  
the sound of water

I love frogs, clouds and travel. Life is a daily journey and the journey itself is home. Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* (*Narrow Road to the Deep North*) fascinated me most, especially the beginning: "The days and months are travelers of eternity, just like the years that come and go." Eternity is where time collapses. Even while caught in the hustle and bustle of daily life, the heart hankers for the stars, the clouds and the moon. Basho prepared himself for the journey by burning moxa on his shins and selling his cottage. Possessing nothing is the greatest freedom to enjoy life. Basho traveled on foot from Nihonbashi with his student, observing Japan, especially the Tohoku and Hokuriku regions, and writing about it.

## Cloistered World

Often, literary works provide emotions that do not exist in reality. They surprise us and affect our sensibility. It does not matter if the work of art was written in the 10th century or the 20th century. In *Makura no Soshi* (*The Pillow Book*), Sei Shonagon describes the seasons, the liaisons, and the fashions of the Heian period through her cloistered world. The use of the *zuihitsu* genre is refreshingly profound. Her essays are sometimes a single sentence and at others

a few pages. They are so different from the European essay form. She tells us that the spring season is not found in flowers and sunlight but in dawn and clouds. It is surprising how sensitive she is to the feeling of words and how insightful she is about the four seasons. Let's start with the first season, spring. She writes, "In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish clouds trail over them." The beauty of spring lies in the way "light creeps over the hills" at dawn and clouds "dyed" in purple. This is obviously a bold, visceral observation. Shonagon writes about "Things that give a clean feeling." Under it, she mentions the way light moves on water, "The play of the light on water as one pours it into a vessel." It is difficult to tell if this is just prose or if it transgresses its boundary and enters poetry. Shonagon had a deep impact on my sensibility.

## Seduction

No one has written so persuasively about the art of seduction in aristocratic Heian as Murasaki Shikibu does in *Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji)*. Over the centuries she has shaped the emotional life of Japan. She writes about the promiscuity of men and women. She is quite intriguing especially in her novel detailing lived life. It is a long book that has many interesting scenes and passages but Shikibu is concentrating more on character rather than plot. She is more interested in the way events reveal the character of Genji than the events themselves. Though a strong element of fantasy is introduced in the development of character, it is impossible to escape the lived life of courtly Heian. Genji hears about his dead mistress and says he is "deeply wounded". Seeing him lament Koremistu, his personal attendant, says, "Why do you grieve so uselessly? Every uncertainty is the result of a certainty. There is nothing in this world really to be lamented." It is a poignant scene that remains etched in the mind.

## Japanese Landscape & Architecture

When I came to Japan in the mid-1990s the Japanese landscape and its history affected my imagination. The roads, the highways, the tunnels, the temples, the castles and the cities had a unique temper of their own. The romance of the past can be understood by Nakasendo, which was once called *hime no kaido*, or "The Road of the Princesses", as many princesses traveled on this road for one reason or another. When I saw it in 1995 it inspired me with the following lines:

A dry morning chill hangs as snow piles up silently. The houses curve slowly along the winding road towards their destination, depending on the direction you are traveling.

Sekigahara cedars watch a lonely crow cawing against the clip-clop of a bent figure climbing the stone steps of the Amaterasu shrine.

History is all there in the shadows. It can spill through a scab. It can reveal itself in compromise, expose itself in regret, or hide as if nothing happened. It has a vast expanse to traverse. The palanquin bearers trudge along the darkening highway with Princess Kazunomiya. The horses were tired but alert. They are determined to fulfill a promise. They are eager to reach a night stop.

Then the entourage snakes its way along the moonlit highway to reach the last village quickly. It's their goal to always close in on Edo to help her marry the shogun in a world-renouncing gesture.

The frothing horses whine, the tired soldiers wheeze, the village fires cackle, the children whisper, the dark cedars sigh, and the rain drops pitter-patter.

"No mischance, no mischance while they rest or sleep," the headman calls out. "Come, come, come, everyone, come, eat, and sleep. Eat the fish and rice."

The paper doors flutter on rails to the rustling of feet over tatami. They drink sake on the table, then sigh and lie down. They sleep like the dead. All for a determined woman.

At Lake Biwa, a last look behind towards Kyoto salvages what is left behind in departures. The water haunts, the wind haunts, and the image on the water haunts, reducing the world to a phantasmagoria.

And then the floating world moves once more, slowly past *sukego* villages, into the modern concerns of priorities and intrigues, of profit and loss.

It was a pleasure to find the historical significance of Nakasendo, an old Japanese highway connecting Edo and Shinano, Nagano Prefecture. In Japan, history is preserved in wooden houses and shrines belonging to that period. The age is also visible on the surface where portions of the roads are inlaid with stones that catch moss and blend with the surroundings. I could imagine how, on their journey, large official groups like that of Kazunomiya got help from the surrounding villages, or *sukego* villages.

The sun has always been the center of life. Without it, nothing can exist on planet Earth. Amaterasu is the sun goddess, like Surya, worshipped in the Grand Shrine of Ise in Mie. The slow, unhurried

quiet of a winter morning along the Nakasendo highway greets the traveler as snow falls quietly. The smell of Japanese cedar and the winding road create longing and nostalgia for things left behind. The personification of the Sekigahara cedars standing as dark and lonely sentinels watching the highway for danger makes the poem come alive. The auditory image accentuates the loneliness – escaping the snow and the cold; the black crow perched on the snow-covered white branch stands as a symbol of loneliness, something suffered by the princess as well. The “clip clop” of the wooden shoes of the temple priest climbing the stone steps of the Amaterasu shrine intensifies the loneliness and quiet. But there is also something energetic about this scene. The old priest, his back bent, is still climbing the stone steps. Though his body is failing, he still tries to do his best. It is here that heaven and earth meet – a window to the unknown world of perseverance. The contrast of images – white snow and black crow; the quiet of the morning and the clip-clop of wooden shoes on stone; dry morning cold; and the sacred shrine of goddess Amaterasu – bring the unused road into life.

### Spectator of Life

Some Japanese novelists tried to breathe life into their writings, but they were surprised that their imaginations did not fly high. Ryunosuke Akutagawa is one of the best writers of short stories. His collection *Rashomon and Other Stories* stands apart from the sophistication of other writers. The cruelty, degradation, and dread that his stories bring out are unmatched. An uncertain future generates anxiety. Goi in the short story “Yam Gruel” reflects, “A man sometimes devotes his life to a desire that he is not sure will ever be fulfilled. Those who laugh at this folly are, after all, no more than mere spectators of life.” What is this desire? It can be for



Photo: Author

Leaves changing color in Kyoto

anything – food, sex, wealth, love or honor. But desire always seeks fulfillment. It fears failure.

Yasunari Kawabata tried to write some excellent stories, like *Snow Country* and *Izu no Odoriko*, but in my view fell short of the mark. The train, the snow country and the rural geisha had all the ingredients for the novel to take off, but it never did. It is lyrical but ends as a *mise-en-scene*. It does not inspire or leave a lasting impression on the reader. Its beginning and ending are excellent, but the dream within is not. Look at the beginning: “The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky.” The powerful two sentences hold enormous possibilities that were never taken up by Kawabata. As if waking from a dream, he concludes, “As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.” No, this would not do. The Milky Way has the same molecular structure as us. It is oneness, a yearning, something lost and found. Kawabata excels in sentences, in scenes, and in seances. The rest of it is sordid, like his life. *The Lake* has a few gems hidden in the story. Kawabata describes the beauty of a nymph as “pure and radiant”, but says of her passing beauty “such perfection doesn’t last after the age of sixteen or seventeen.” But the desire, the gaze, the *objet petit a* (unattainable object), does not explode but collapses into meaninglessness. There is no self-awareness, no change, and no self-discovery. Momoi just grows old without being wise.

### Shadows

Before I encountered Jun’ichiro Tanizaki’s novels, I read his short essay *In Praise of Shadows*. Beyond doubt, it was the best document of the pain of modernity that I have ever read. Tanizaki understands Japanese architecture and aesthetics. He is saddened by the march of Western civilization and the impact of modernity. I have felt it too, and I sympathize with his views. He writes about traditional Japanese houses, toilets, brassware, shadows, feminine beauty, Japanese paper, Western ink pens, and the telephone. Tanizaki writes about the *pulvis et umbra*, our dusty, shadowy existence: “We find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates. If light is scarce, then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty.”

The shadow grips the body tenaciously, portending a wish in its spectral silhouette. It prefigures the moment in its pastel contours, representing a fulgent design in its blanched existence. It collapses in a penumbra, revealing for an instant the effulgence of the universe and the sweet promise of felicity. Tanizaki does all this with the swift movement of his brush. He is a writer that the West could hardly comprehend the way it did Kawabata. In his inimitable style, Tanizaki eulogizes the aesthetic quality of the Japanese toilet, which possesses “a degree of dimness, absolute cleanliness, and quiet so

complete one can hear the hum of a mosquito". It is possible to hear the sound of "softly falling rain", the "intimacy to the raindrops falling from the eaves and the trees". Sitting in a Kanto toilet, you can hear the "chirping of insects", the "song of the birds", and "the moon". Tanizaki suspects that some of the haiku poets got their best ideas from here. Tanizaki states that the "Western-style toilet in a hotel" cannot match the "elegance" and "perfection" of a Japanese toilet. He cautions Japanese ladies not to imitate European women by moving in the sun but to find the evening when they look most beautiful. The smooth flow of the brush on washi creates the aesthetic ambience of writing that the scratchy Western pen and paper do not. Tanizaki laments that if Western modernity had not entered cities, Japan would have found its own modernity. This sentiment resonated with my Eastern sensibility.

Bisexuality is a theme that is played out with its legal and moral implications even in the 21st century. Tanizaki wrote *Quicksand* in 1930 and Hemingway wrote "A Sea Change" in 1931. Both are stories of a bisexual relationship where the man has to accept the woman's lesbian partner. It is the surprise and the moral conflict that is played out. In *Quicksand* Mitsuko confesses to Sonoko, "It's natural for a man to look at a woman and think she's beautiful, but when I realize I can have another woman infatuated with me, I ask myself if I'm really that beautiful! It makes me blissfully happy!"

## Themes

Haruki Murakami finds excellent themes, but rarely does he create believable characters. There is an elegiac sadness in his stories and plots that move along the lines of magic realism. His sex scenes are quite unrealistic, verging on fantasy. I wonder what happened to the novelist. His portrayal of women, like that of most Japanese male writers, is askew. It doesn't jell. Female voices are muted and so are their actions. Tanizaki, in his prose writing, gives a lot of respect to Japanese women, but in his stories this respect is lacking.

The women in Japan are beautiful and clean, moving courteously with light makeup. They spend a lot on their dresses and their food, and they want you to spend a lot on them too. They must define friendship, love, or any other kind of relationship. If a girl goes on a date with a boy three times and the boy still does not confess his love, the relationship is broken. Nothing is left to interpretation. Japanese is the only language of communication, though more and more young people are bravely speaking English. If anchored properly, the companionship of women is enduring. It doesn't matter who you are as long as you treat them nicely and give them the freedom to do what they want to do.

We do not see a modern woman arising from the ashes of patriarchy. We are not sure if the bewildering beauty of the parallel world in *1Q84* can be lessened by love and concern for others. The heroine Aomame speeds in her taxi through the streets of Tokyo to

execute a wife beater, and the radio plays Vivaldi and Leos Janacek's pipe organ in Sinfonietta, symbolizing "modern man's fight for victory". She is dressed natively in a Junko Shimada suit, Charles Jourdan high heels, and sunglasses, and carries a 9-millimeter Heckler and Koch automatic pistol to complete her mission. But once her mission is complete, she seeks her true love, Tengo. The image of a female warrior hiding a loving heart is a motif oft repeated in world literature, from Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* to Tomoe Gozen in *Heike Monogatari*. Aomame is not pretending to be the new Japanese woman because she is not. Most Japanese women give up reading Murakami because he sounds so inauthentic.

The young do what they want to do in a runaway world. Murakami pursues their concerns providing a hypothetical axis (*kaso-jiku*) on which the world spins. In his novel *After Dark*, time collapses and expands depending on the choices his characters make. He takes the reader seductively through Tokyo's nighttime love hotels and cafes celebrating seediness. But then what? "Time moves in its own special way in the middle of the night. You can't fight it." The known *terra firma* transforms itself into an unmapped *terra incognita* where the unwary fall into "inaccessible fissures". So far, so good, but characters do not undergo transformation or enter a new awareness. The reader sees only a gossamer dream that collapses upon touch. In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, there is "a silent place where everything can disappear, melting together in a single, overlapping figure", a place one can touch many of the "beautiful lost things".

In the absence of certitudes, Murakami's characters rely on their insight to make sense of the world. Often, they get a "cut-off sensation" where the event-connecting chain of our consciousness is broken. Murakami's fictional spaces are filled with intense passion and a longing to be loved. But there is a bewildering confusion at the heart of his fiction. People like the Sheep Man reject the constraining aspects of society but find themselves "at the edge of the world" where "everything spill[s] over into nothingness", which only love redeems (*Dance Dance Dance*, 389). Can the writer or his characters say anything about the efficacy or futility of the world they live in? Fuka-Eri answers, "Only time will tell."

I am a passionate fool who allows experience to enter into my consciousness to create a new world. It is a wild goose chase to seek reality in a literary world, but to create a literary world without reality is impossible. JS

Mukesh Williams is a professor at Soka University; distinguished professor at Shoolini University; and former faculty of Keio University. He is a university educator, media writer, and poet and has taught modern literature, media studies, and cultural history at St. Stephen's College Delhi, Shoolini University, Soka University, and Keio University. He has conducted seminars on global cultures and counseled Japanese universities on academic exchange and PR strategies.