

Three Modern Japanese Writers: Natsume Soseki, Tokuda Shusei, and Higuchi Ichiyo

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The social class of the characters who appear in Natsume Soseki's novels is the same throughout. I've always found it strange that lower class people hardly ever make an appearance in his novels, but in fact this may account for Soseki's popularity today. Perhaps precisely because his novels are peopled with students, scholars, and similar highbrow characters, it is easy to include his stories in government-approved textbooks. The characters are just right for middle and high school students to read about. They are highly educated individuals, fitting models for today's education society. It may seem reassuring to recommend such works to today's students for their education, but we must not forget that the educated class of Soseki's era was the super elite. The characters were the educated elite in an era when there were only two or three universities in all of Japan, and they were often on a career path that might lead to an appointment to a Cabinet Ministry, quite different from today's students and professors.

There are no rules or regulations that novels must be written about people at the bottom of the social scale, or that satisfaction can be found only in emphasizing the dark side of Japanese society. This would be as hypocritical as emphasizing only the good, an attitude of twisting things. But still it would be a very big mistake to

think that the social class depicted in Natsume Soseki's novels was the only one in the Meiji period. Not only did Soseki not write about the lower class, he did not describe the various feudal and otherwise restrictive systems of his time. This, I believe, was probably intentional.

First of all, his novels were serialized in a newspaper. For this reason it was probably necessary for the works to have a certain wholesomeness in order to be read comfortably in the home. Second, he had a track record as one of the leaders of the Meiji period enlightenment. Even though he knew of the existence of the lower class, it's unlikely that he knew the real circumstances in which those people lived. Soseki was, after all, a professor at Tokyo University. It would be like asking Henry James to write Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*.

Third, to put a more positive, and my own, personal spin on the situation, I think he was conscious of the possible educational effect of his novels on the reading public. That is, he hoped to enlighten readers by creating novels that would be useful in the formation of a middle class. Perhaps he was trying to include in his novels a teaching role, instructing people in the middle-class way of thinking and middle-class emotions.

We might say that this is particularly true of his novels concerning romantic love. The love relations depicted in Natsume Soseki's novels, particularly in the context of gender relations at the time were, for his contemporary readers, utterly new. The gender relationships of the time were often defined by the red-light districts, but Soseki didn't write a word about the amusement quarters or prostitutes. Nor did he write about the world of geisha and other entertainers. Instead, he wrote about the very serious, deep love of the young intelligentsia in works in such as *Kokoro*. The gender situation depicted by Soseki was the most advanced (shall we say modern?) point of gender relations in his times. Even though a contemporary writer such as Dostoyevsky wrote about the prostitute Sonia in *Crime and Punishment*, Soseki did not write about prostitutes or female entertainers. Perhaps Soseki regretted this in his later years. As if to make up for a bias in his stories toward the love problems of the intelligentsia, in his final work, *Light and Darkness*, Soseki has the protagonist Tsuda, a typical member of Soseki's intelligentsia, go to a hospital that treats sexually transmitted diseases, although for a different reason. And at another point in the book, when the protagonist Tsuda is

at a country resort for treatment in the hot springs, there is reference to a couple on a lovers' tryst. But this was the first and last attempt of Soseki to introduce in any significant way into his works the pre-modern gender situation. It should be noted, by the way, that *Light and Darkness* is believed to have been influenced by Dostoyevsky's writings.

I am a great admirer of Soseki's writings, but I have doubts about the critical evaluations of his writings that were part of the so-called "Soseki Boom" that took place in the 1990s. I also find ideological weaknesses in criticism that fails to pay attention to the class peculiarities of Soseki's writings. This tendency runs the danger of becoming an ideology that lends support to the contemporary national illusion that 90% of Japanese belong to the middle class. I fear that it cannot help but become an ideology that suppresses signs of the weakness and immaturity of the so-called middle class of today in Japan. To read Soseki without considering the social background Soseki left out is to lend support to such an ideology.

Meiji society was still very much a class society, a time when the four-class distinctions of the Edo era (the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants) still remained entrenched in people's minds; it was a time when there was still discrimination against outcast classes, when poor families sold daughters, and when there was an aristocratic class. People who read only Soseki would not be able to imagine this. It is necessary to compare Soseki's works with a work such as Higuchi Ichiyo's 1895 work *Takekurabe*, translated into English as *Child's Play*. This is the story of children who grow up near the gay quarters, and the protagonist is a young girl destined to become a prostitute in the quarters. It is also necessary to read Soseki's works in comparison with a work such as Tokuda Shusei's *Arakure, The Wild One*, 1915. This is the story of the daughter of a gardener who runs away from home and makes her way through a very difficult life as she struggles in a man's world.

One journalist has said that the power of television can be described as the power to make 100 million people into idiots; in the same way, to say that we can read only Soseki and ignore Higuchi Ichiyo or Tokuda Shusei is to agree that since the Meiji period Japan has been a country of 100 million middle class people.

This is evidence, one might say, that Natsume Soseki can be seen as a remark-

ably contemporary and popular writer; and at the same time it shows, ironically, that present day Japan appears to be a classless society like that of Soseki's. But it only appears to be such. In fact, Japan is not a classless society, and never was, but contemporary ideology is moving in such a way as to make it seem that way. The so-called Soseki Boom was one part of this ideology. It is an ideological act to assign Soseki's writings for middle school students and remove the historical context, and to theorize on the betterment of mankind and the nature of true love. In fact, to me it seems that the serious demeanor of the perpetrators of the Aum Shinrikyo poison gas incident in 1995 brings to mind the demeanor of characters in a Soseki novel, for example K, a young Buddhist in *Kokoro*, who kills himself.

I would like to focus my evaluation of Natsume Soseki on his skillful depiction of female characters. My view is that Soseki did not create male characters of the lower class, but that he created female characters to make up for that deficiency. Soseki's women are not of the lower class, but to the elite male characters of Soseki's novels they appear as the *other*. The women in Soseki's novels are the ones who disturb the peaceful minds of the young men, the future doctors, the leaders of science, the cabinet ministers, and the young men who occupy the privileged spots in society—those who carry forth the modernization of Japan and the advancement of civilization.

These women, almost as if there were a women's class in society, seem different from men in terms of class. Of course, it is not possible to bundle women into one group and put them into a class category, but in the case of Soseki, in comparison to men, women always appear to be of a different essence and nature. They engage in unpredictable speech and behavior, and throw men into a sense of uneasiness and anxiety. This is because, from the male point of view, they appear to have gained a freedom not possible for the men. They have the ability to disturb a man's modernized ethics, his middle class ethics, and his modern or made-up view of love. The starting point of my view of Soseki is the idea that while men of social classes other than the intelligentsia appear only in works of Soseki's late years, such as *Grass by the Wayside* and *Light and Darkness*, in the other novels female antagonists take the place of men from different social classes to serve as a contrast to the middle class male protagonists.

The author Oguri Fuyo is not read much these days, but I would like to draw your attention to a work of his translated as “Love Cooling Down.” It is not a great work, but since Oguri Fuyo tried to write about the lower classes of the Meiji period, by examining his work we can view Natsume Soseki’s works from an entirely different perspective. Oguri Fuyo’s experiment was not particularly successful, but by looking at the reason for his failure we can understand the problems of Natsume Soseki and the important position of Tokuda Shusei.

“Love Cooling Down” describes a seaside fishing village called Nago in the prefecture of Chiba in the late Meiji period. A middle-aged man of the Tokyo intelligentsia visits the village for recuperation. He meets by chance a friend by the name of Shimura who has come to a sanitarium for treatment of tuberculosis, and he is accompanied by his younger sister Momoe. The sister Momoe says that when she is not taking care of her brother, she wants to learn English, and so she comes to visit the protagonist. The sister is nineteen years old. The protagonist is a middle-aged man with a wife and child, whom he has left to come alone to Nago for rest and relaxation. The reason for leaving his wife and child is left out of his novel. The two begin to study English. The texts used are the Cassell edition of Shakespeare and an English translation of the Bible. As the novel progresses, while studying Shakespeare and the Bible, they begin to fall in love. Nothing is written in the novel about what work of Shakespeare or what sections of the Bible they are studying. Much is left out of this novel.

That a middle aged man with a wife and child would fall in love with a friend’s younger sister is a commonplace event depicted in today’s weekly pulp magazines, but at the end of the Meiji period, it was considered scandalous. By the end of the Meiji period, in approximately 1910, the Meiji Enlightenment had become completely Victorianized, both materialistically and systemically. The author Tayama Katai recommended this work, and wrote a preface to it when it was published after its first appearance in a magazine. Perhaps this was because its theme resembled that of Katai’s own well-known work “The Quilt,” written in 1907. They are similar in that Katai’s work depicts the love story of a married teacher with a family who falls in love with one of his students.

In the preface, Tayama Katai praised “Love Cooling Down” as splendid for its frank confession of the nature of the heart of a middle-aged man, and for the cou-

rageous challenge it presents to the moral hypocrisy of the present-day society. But the sale of this work was quickly prohibited. Even though it had the same theme as Katai's story "The Quilt," "Love Cooling Down" was prohibited, while "The Quilt" was not. We can only speculate as to the reason. They were published only one year apart, "The Quilt" in 1907 and "Love Cooling Down" in 1908, so perhaps the standards of the censors changed during that short time. In 1907 the law on adultery in the civil code was revised, and the punishment made somewhat more severe. But this law referred to the adultery of women alone, and it was not possible for women to charge men with adultery.

Soseki too was interested in adultery as a topic for literature, but not this openly. We have to wait for his later work *Light and Darkness* to see the problem of adultery treated openly. Needless to say, adultery is an important topic for novelists. It is also a problem that reveals the various ideologies that make up the modern. But here I wish to focus on a different problem, without going too deeply into the question of adultery.

In depicting the illicit love of a middle-aged man, "Love Cooling Down" has as its background the allegedly open sexuality of the young women of the Nago village in Chiba Prefecture. The description is very interesting. The middle-aged protagonist describes the situation in the village in a critical manner.

Perhaps due to its warm southerly location, perhaps because it is near fishing villages, all the way from Nago to Funagata the sexual behavior of men and women is frightfully wild. They are so self-indulgent and open about it that people who first come here from other places are simply shocked. When summer comes the native young folks go out for night play, and the seashore and Kannon Mountain are turned completely into places for secret meetings. There are no morals, I was told by the owner of my inn.

Even nearby where I am staying, the daughter at the used clothes shop has a love child, and rumor has it she now has a new boyfriend. The widow of the dry goods store, the wife of the sweets salesman...the daughter of the noodle shop next door is barely 14 or 15, but she's already showing signs of being pregnant and of having had an abortion.

(Oguri Fuyo, "Love Cooling Down," translated by Tom Lohlich)

Oguri Fuyo does not take into account the absurdity of a situation in which a man takes this point of view even while he himself is falling into an illicit love while reading Shakespeare and the Bible. It is ironic that the protagonist does not realize the ridiculousness of his own situation, but only looks down on what he sees.

This irony reminds us that before being colonized by France, the people of Tahiti allegedly had a similar kind of sexual behavior. But shortly after being colonized by France and receiving education at the hands of French missionaries, they were prohibited from practicing their traditional sexual manners. The Tahiti culture of open sexual behavior was officially forced to change to that of the Christians. But in reality, this led to confusion about behavior. Both the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss and the American novelist Herman Melville describe this phenomenon.

We would certainly have our doubts about whether the protagonist's illicit love can really be the "naturalness" found in the heart of a middle-aged man, the reason Tayama Katai praised Oguri's work. I think that this illicit love can be thought of as a kind of ethical experiment. It is a kind of unconscious moral posturing. Since the love of the young village women is seen as of a different dimension and of a different meaning for the word love, the protagonist's consciousness should not be troubled by the contradiction of his view. Consequently, Oguri Fuyo could not write of the ridiculousness of what he observed. I might add quickly that Momoe, who came to learn English with the protagonist, eventually thinks of going to the United States to become a feminist. For the young woman too must have had a sense of experimentation, of posturing.

The love Soseki writes of is also a kind of ethical experiment. The main challenge of Soseki's great work *Kokoro* is to question experimentally whether true love can exist between a man and a woman without resulting in tragedy, giving up all the possibilities of one's life. *Kokoro* is the love tragedy of a youth who strongly believes that "True love is not that different from a deeply religious heart."

It may seem cruel to call someone's firm belief "posturing," but it was only in Japan of the 1890s that love had this kind of definition. Under the influence of Christianity, love between a man and woman was seen as platonic, even religious. Until then the love between a man and woman in Japanese ethics was described using a pre-modern word, *Irogoto*, what I will call here "sexual." Japanese did not have the

word *rennai*, which is now the common word for love, or romantic love, until 1890.

The intelligentsia began their posturing in regard to love unconsciously and as a group after the 1890s. The men in Soseki's novels are a part of this intelligentsia. One might say that they are typical of it. When Soseki treated the theme of the love of the intelligentsia, he omitted the sexuality of the lower class people. He didn't even recognize the existence of their sexual love. When we look at it in this way, we can see that it is difficult to compare sexuality as the cultural behavior of the lower class and sexuality as the cultural posturing of the intelligentsia. Soseki avoided this problem. Or he ignored it. And because of that, his novels succeeded. They succeeded as works that describe the true essence of modern love. But as previously mentioned, this can be considered dangerous for the reader. Reading Soseki's *Kokoro* can be dangerous, if we don't take into consideration the question of what meaning there is in the sincerity of love depicted in Soseki's *Kokoro* for lower class characters from Ichiyo's "Child's Play" or the characters in Shusei's *Arakure*. The women in Soseki's novels manipulate this love posturing of the intelligentsia men in Soseki's writings. In his writings, the desire to modernize consciousness means the desire to modernize sexuality into "holy love." Is this perhaps something like what the French missionaries did in Tahiti?

Soseki was aware of the love posturing of the men and women of the intelligentsia class. Soseki's disciple Morita Sohei was famous for attempting (unsuccessfully) to commit suicide with Hiratsuka Raicho, and this 1908 attempt at suicide is criticized in Soseki's novel *And Then*. There is no sign that their love was some form of true love that was considered out of bounds by society. Soseki wonders suspiciously what internal power moves them to do such things. I take his doubts as evidence (and critical evidence) that Japan had entered into an era where it was difficult to distinguish between the true love Soseki envisioned, and posturing love as shown in the intelligentsia who attempt suicide without good reason. Soseki succeeds in creating an ideology of "love as religious truth" in his novel *Kokoro*, but its success comes at a high price, since the main character commits suicide, becoming a martyr for the ideology. But if the ideology is false, martyrdom is useless. So the next best thing is to throw away the modern ideology of love. This gives birth to Japanese Naturalism.

Returning to the story of Oguri Fuyo, it seems that he did not notice the difficult problem that exists in contrast between the lower class's sexuality as cultural behavior and the intelligentsia's sexuality as cultural posturing. As a result, inadvertently, rudely, and perhaps innocently, he looks at and criticizes sexuality as the cultural behavior of members of the lower class, who live according to pre-modern ethics, simply as if he were a cultural anthropologist or a colonist.

To look at a different class from the viewpoint of someone not of the class is like being a tourist in a foreign country. Or if not a tourist, then it might be like the unreasonable criticism of the colonist. Hiratsuka Raicho, who was mentioned earlier in connection with a suicide attempt, became a famous Japanese feminist, and she wrote about Higuchi Ichiyo, recognizing the worth of Ichiyo's writings to a certain extent, but she concluded: "She was a woman who sacrificed herself for her parents and brothers; the value of such a woman's efforts is passive, and Higuchi Ichiyo is a woman of Japan's past." She says that Higuchi Ichiyo's writings have no progressive ideas, no problems, and no creativity.

Perhaps she was trying to influence the direction of Ichiyo's writings. But this sounds like the colonial words of a person in a position of power, talking to a weak person without power. When you can do nothing but sacrifice yourself, when your struggles and efforts are not active enough to influence others, when your values are too passive, when you have no idealistic philosophy to proclaim to the world, when you can't come up with a problem that you can make a case to society as an activist for social reform, Hiratsuka Raicho would not think, "Well, I have a pen, I have paper, I have poetry, stories, songs." She did not recognize the existence of weak people.

But I believe that literature in one respect can be a quiet form of activism in this area. The magnificence of the people of the lower class, who live according to pre-modern ethics, that is the Geisha and entertainers described by Tokuda Shusei, what Tokuda Shusei calls the majesty of the Literary Naturalism, is that. He describes people in positions of weakness, not as a colonial tourist, but as a person who is also weak. This may seem impossible, but Tokuda Shusei accomplished it. He wrote about the world of the Geisha and worked the abacus in a Geisha house in Tokyo. This was when he wrote his last, unfinished work *An Epitome (Shukuzu)*.

Shusei's novels do not have distinct plots. They are flat, and are structured like assorted essays or sketches. Writing about pre-modern society, not as being under modernization, results in plotless novels, since the protagonists neither strive to be winners in the modernization of life nor to avoid being losers in it. Generally speaking, plot structure in stories corresponds with structure of the society in progress. Shusei's plotlessness subverts such the social structure of modernization. He is as great a writer as Soseki.

Tanizaki Jun'ichiro wrote a work called *Shunkin: A Portrait of a Lady*, which shows the hypocrisy of gender relationships in modern Japanese society. But Shusei's novels do not try even to reveal hypocrisy; they show only "un-modernized" gender relationships, like a black and white movie by Ozu Yasujiro or Mizoguchi Kenji. That might be because even attempting to reveal hypocrisy would be a kind of encouragement to what seemed to be an unnatural modernization of society. Tanizaki depicts a shocking drama that subverts modernized gender relationships in Japan, but Tokuda Shusei describes everyday life in the Geisha world. Description is a form of subversion for Tokuda Shusei.

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