

A REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION VALUES THROUGH FIGURATIVE LIVES OF THE GEISHAS IN SNOW COUNTRY: A NEW HISTORICISM PERSPECTIVE

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Article History

Received : May 14th, 2020

Revised : May 20th, 2020

Accepted : May 26th, 2020

Published : May 29th, 2020

Abstract: *Snow Country* is the story about the figurative lives of geishas in Japanese society. As a Nobel Prize recipient *Snow Country* is widely considered to be a masterpiece, a powerful tale of wasted love set amid the desolate beauty of western Japan, from which the writer configure and represent various cultural and educational values within Japanese community. These values are expressed through a beautiful narration of the life of three important figures, Shimamura the guest and Komako the country geisha, and another country geisha names Yoko. Shimamura somehow likes Komako and therefore visits the resort a few times. Komako really likes Shimamura that she has done a lot of things like a crazy person in love. In addition, there is a bit of healthy competition going on between Komako and Yoko which symbolizes the practices of 'competitive' life surrounding the Japanese. Here, as a part of cultural and educational value, the life of 'modern' geisha has been justified as one of the ways to keep and sustain Japanese old tradition which have become the basis of most educational practices in the country which worth following.

Keywords: *Character education value, figurative life, geisha, new historicism*

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly understood that the figure of Geisha in most Japanese literature has been the fascinating figure. For centuries, the imaginative presence of geisha is represented and reflected well on the host who can afford the glamorous companions of the geisha. As it is represented in real life, a geisha actually is a woman artist who is often claimed to dedicate her life for serving highly respected and powerful men, and from her being a geisha she generates her life. Geisha is an artist with a predicate of a trained dancer, musician and singer. After a long period of hard working and attempting to transform herself into a 'good' geisha, she involved in a sort of living environment which is actually apart from what she really expected. She has to live under a kimono which cover the 'secret' of her life that she is in charge of keeping and protecting in secret.

Being stressful in the whole lives, geisha is in fact a recreated creature who pretends to behave under the meaning of the word 'geisha' itself as being artist and good tempered person. She is responsible to keep the secret of her real life; and she has to realize that her life is not actually for herself but for someone else that she

must dedicate through either material or 'humbling' services.

One of the memorable geishas who still 'survives' today in Japanese life is the hot-spring geishas who are illustrated very vividly in Kawabata's novel *Snow Country*. The geishas are configured as the genuine geisha who keep providing 'complete' services in the spring inns, and have performed as geishas for years. Therefore, it is often described that someone who becomes a current geisha is usually dragged into such profession through her interest and involvement in Japanese traditional arts. For the modern geishas, their life is configured as the life in the real world in the form of a mixture of the things which may be true and untrue, pure and impure, sincere and insincere.

The brief description about geisha above indicates that the writer of *Snow Country*, Kawabata, is described as a natural novelist leading with spirituality of a rich life and who would be able to pick out only those thing in life that were true, pure, and sincere, and then rearrange them to produce an order of reality more beautiful than the everyday kind. A man living spiritually deprived existence would not be capable of doing so. In general, then, it can be said that, for Kawabata, the best literary material

is a life that is vital, positive, and pure. It is from this point that the values of character education are reflected (Bohlin, 2005).

Various values of character education, as conceived by Kawabata, then, are dynamic. It is energy generated by striving after an ideal, that is, it is a 'longing' fact that critics frequently called him as a decadent writer or nihilist. Kawabata once explained that he has never written a story that has decadence or nihilism for its main theme (Bohlin, 2005). What seems so is in truth a kind of longing for vitality. Consequently, uninitiated readers took it for labor in vain or a waste of effort, and saw him as a man who had lost all faith in life. However, life burns more purely, more beautifully, when it longs for a distant ideal. The ideal may not be attainable, but the effort to attain it is beautiful.

Describing all aspects of the life of geishas, especially the hot spring geishas, is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it will be focused in the short description of the hot spring geisha in their figurative lives as the reflection of the values of character education. New historicism (Habib, 2005) criticism is used to view those figurative lives. New historicism criticism views literature as work of art that must be read and appreciated in the context of broader culture that involves the view to a literary work through the political, religious, and aesthetic contexts.

New Historicism

It is noted (Habib, 2005) that historicism began toward the end of the eighteenth century, and since then it has been characterized by a number of concerns and features. Most fundamentally, there is an insistence that all systems of thought, all phenomena, all institutions, all works of art, and all literary texts must be situated within historical perspective. This means that texts or phenomena cannot be somehow torn from history and analyzed in isolation, outside of the historical process. They are determined in their form and content by their specific historical circumstances, that is, their specific situation in time and place. Thus, the assumptions and methods of analyses belong to different historical periods and different social, political, and economic circumstances. In other words, literature must be read within the broader contexts of its culture, in the context of other discourses ranging over politics, education, religion, and aesthetic, as well as its economic context (Adkins and Hughes, 2011).

The other important feature of historicism is that the history of a given phenomenon is sometimes held to operate according to certain identifiable laws, yielding a certain predictability and explanatory power (Parvini, 2012: 97). In addition, historicism is often claimed to arise from the recognition that societies and cultures separated in time have differing values and beliefs. The historian operates within the horizon of his/her own world view, a certain broad set of assumptions and beliefs to achieve a new historicism empathetic understanding of a distant culture? How can students fed on the epistemological fat of a New Critical diet begin to appreciate the world of the Homeric epics, the language of which are not sure of how to pronounce, and the actions of whose characters are, by our moral standards, often bizarre? How to avoid imposing ones' own culture prejudices, not to mention his/her own interests and motives, on texts historically removed from us.

The dilemma of historical interpretation can easily lead to a kind of aesthetic formalism on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to a historical view of texts as culturally and socially determined. The fundamental principles of historicism then are opposed to those of many twentieth century movements such as New Criticism. In general, structuralism is actually a historical, focusing on synchronic analyses of language and literature (Nayar, 2009). However, structuralism differs from formalism in the sense that it does not isolate the literary text but situates it within the broader codes, signs, systems, and registers of other discourses. In this sense, its endeavors are compatible with those of historicism, and from this point it developed into a 'new' historicism.

The 'New' historicism which came up in the 1980s reacted against both the formalist view of the literary text as somehow autonomous and Marxist views which ultimately related texts to the economic infrastructure. It saw the literary text not as somehow unique but as a kind of discourse situated within a complex of cultural discourses— religious, political, economic, aesthetic – which both shaped it and, in turn, were shaped by it (Habib, 2005). If there was anything new about this procedure, it was insistence, drawn from Foucault and post-structuralism, that "history" itself is a text, an interpretation, and that there is no single history. It also rejected any notion of historical progress or teleology, and broke away from any literary historiography based on the study of genres and figures. In the

other circumstance, the concept of ‘culture’ in which New Historicism situated literary texts was itself regarded as a textual construct. In other words, the ‘New’ Historicism refused to accord any kind of unity or homogeneity to history or culture (Habib, 2005).

The most general direction in which Foucault influenced the New Historicism was that his contextualizations were super-structural. Here, even the realm of economics, like history itself, was seen as a discourse or text. The new historicists tended, then, to view literature as one discourse among many cultural discourses, insisting on engaging with this entire complex in a localized manner, refusing to engage in categorical generalizations or to commit to any definite political stance. This means that the contextualization of literature involved a reexamination of an author’s position within a linguistic system (Carrió-Pastor, 2019).

The figurative lives of hot-spring geishas in Snow Country

It was presented previously that *Snow Country* is a story of the figurative daily life of the hot-spring geishas which is portrayed through Komako, it is one of the main characters. Through the point of view of New Historicism criticism, it is portrayed that the behavior and performance of a geisha keep changing from time to time through of being a geisha. From a girlish and heavily-made maiko, a geisha developed to the more somber appearance of an older and experienced geisha. The physical appearance of the geisha is claimed to be the indication of her maturity, particularly when it is seen from the ways she dressed up wearing different motives of kimono, hairstyles, hairpins, and even the length of eyebrows. All these became the rhythm of life which indicates the perfection and the different stages of development of the geisha, from being a young girl to the matured woman.

As it generally happens, a geisha is ‘obliged’ to put on various styles of kimono with extravagant ‘obi’. Obi is a sort of sash which is put on over the kimono in which the obi for woman is usually bigger or wider than the one worn by man. In its significance, obi is configured to be an important fashion accessory with its special brightness it and the worn kimono spark an exotic balance which later on represents the balance of geisha personality and physical appearance.

In *Snow Country*, geisha is figured out through Komako who is always ready and prepared to offer something wonderful and fresh. The ways she put on dresses represent the wholeness of her manner and personality; thus, she is supposed to wear her soft, unlined summer kimono. This shows that the way a hot spring geisha wears dresses is different from other geishas in other regions and the modern women (Suzuki, 2009).

Since the setting of the story is the cold winter, a geisha is supposed to wear lined kimonos. In contrary to tradition, Komako is figured to unlined summer kimono instead of wearing the lined one. The way she was wearing dresses signified that she was a geisha. She is also configured to wear an expensive obi, although it did not suit her kimono. Shimamura caught a glimpse of sadness in the dress she was wearing. She also had the short, thick eyebrows sloping gently down to enfold the line discreetly. Besides, the line of her eyelids neither rose nor fell.

The ‘healthy’ rivalry between Komako and Yoko appears when Yoko, who sometimes served as an apprentice geisha, wore even inexpensive kimono, unlike other maikos in other regions who had more exotic appearance (Suzuki, 2009). Yoko was described to wear a pair of mountain trousers and an orange-red flannel kimono. Looking at different ways of putting on dresses, Shimamura considered Komako and Yoko as representing the figurative lives of simple and amateur geisha who may find it difficult to develop as ‘good’ geishas. Thus, being in such a way of putting on dresses, the hot spring geisha is configured as a ‘lower class’ geisha who is completely different from those who lived in the cities like Tokyo and Kyoto. Although the hot-spring geishas are trained to be skillful geishas, there is always an impression that they are not professional compared to the others who lived and served their guests in the rural areas.

Being a geisha, in the novel, is configured to be the profession which become a ‘must’ for a woman of poor family origin (Edmund and Korn, 2002). In other words, being a geisha is often interpreted as being involved in a prostitution as the media to survive in the economic life. It is figured also in novel that, in the geisha society, there is a certain convention that is geisha’s responsibility to reimburse all the money she has spent for the training, dresses and all the needs to become a geisha to the okiya. It is noted that

Okiya is the person who is in charge of being responsible to supply all the needs of the geisha.

The traditional figure of a geisha in the novel is represented by Komako, a beautiful and amiable woman who is born in a snowy country, later becomes the title of the novel, who served being a geisha in the beauty of Tokyo city. She was forced to become a geisha to earn economic support to help her family. Once, Komako was expected to marry Yukio who is fact was not born in the snow country. Yukio's mother was a typical 'trained' geisha who always kept the feeling of being responsible for the sustainability of geisha. Her serious illness on her forties had brought her back to the hot-spring area for her recovery. This sparks the idea and expectation that 'geisha' will stay alive.

In the *Snow Country*, the lives of geishas are configured as complex and divided into various systems. Here, the term 'hanamachi' which means 'flower of the town' is used to configure the highest rank of the system of geishas located in Kyoto. Hot-spring geishas are located next to 'hanamachi' in which the 'good' geishas are working in 'glamorous' resorts. This makes them to be configured as the 'expensive' geisha.

As the other geisha, the hot-spring geishas are trained geishas in dancing and playing musical instruments. These geishas are trained to play the musical instruments and be professional at dancing since their early age, and go through the whole of their lives of being a geisha. In addition to being good at dancing and playing musical instruments, some geishas are configured to be good at writing poems and composing musical notations.

The novel *Snow Country* configures the life of the hot-spring geisha as being represented by Komako's life who served her guests in a beautiful hot-spring inn. It is configured in the novel that most of the guests visited the hot-spring mountain area in the skiing season. When the skiing season ended, there came in the spring green season which also makes the geisha to keep busy providing the best services for the 'green-season' guests. Such a configuration and rhythm of lives goes on and on for all the geishas, including the 'modern' Japanese geishas who, of course, live in a different environment.

In addition, the lives of the geishas are also configured under the image of a beautiful and interesting woman with white face and red lipped who is covered with a tidy organized kimono. This gives the impression that geishas are also

responsible to keep the 'Japanese' values. Although various criticisms come over and over about the image of geisha, the Japanese people are confident that the life of geisha is one of the configurations of the life Japanese cultural tradition which has to be kept. Thayer (2008) described the life of geisha within Japanese culture as being the instruments for maintaining the cultural values of both traditional and modern Japanese.

One of the many values of character education (Smagorinsky and Taxel, 2005) which is intended to keep through the configuration of the lives of geishas is 'pleasure'. The ways that prostitution developed in Japan, however, provide an interesting comparison. The Japanese believe that pleasure is the cure of the negative social impacts of being 'busy' and it could release people from humdrum of everyday life. However, it is generally acknowledged that the pursuit of pleasure is developing as the main characteristics of the middle up to upper class people in Japan. This means that there should be an attempt to protect these groups of people from getting beyond the control of having pleasure through sexual services. For this purpose, the Japanese government seems to configure the lives of geishas as not must deal with 'sexual' services but also with cultural and entertainment services (Thayer, 2008).

The heart of the geisha life lay in two Japanese cities, Kyoto and Tokyo. One, Kyoto, is a snapshot in time geisha of the past; living in the *hanamachi* with their geisha family, leaning the arts, and preserving the way of the geisha. The other, Tokyo, is struggling to retain the dwindling geisha arts where technology advancement threatens to take over.

The hot-spring geisha and her world as vividly depicted in the novel continue to fascinate people around the world as part of their image of a mysterious and timeless Japan. Prostitution is of course referred to as the "oldest profession", and the history of the geisha stretches back several centuries (Hutchinson and Williams, 2006). But while many people assume that geisha is just a Japanese word for a prostitute, the somewhat more romantic word 'courtesan' is probably closer in nuance, though even that is misleading when their history is considered. The word geisha itself literally means 'person of the arts' – indeed the earliest geisha were men – and it is as performers of dance, music, and poetry that they actually spend most of their working time.

CONCLUSION

Geisha is configured as an important part of the value of Japanese tradition and civilization. Japanese community has considered the geisha tradition as something ‘glorious’ but, unfortunately, it is often related and interpreted as having the sense of the submission of a woman to the rich and powerful men. This gives an impression that the life of geisha is not more than a forced dedication and deception.

The configuration of geishas’ lives symbolizes poverty and other negative images of Japanese urban woman is in fact undeniable. The existence of geishas and the images of the places where they live are considered to be something which cannot be put apart from Japanese cultural heritage. And these all are presented figuratively in *Snow Country* a novel written by a noble-prize awarded Japanese writer, Yasunari Kawabata. In this novel, geishas’ lives have been represented by Komako’s figures as a geisha who lived in the Japanese hot-spring urban area.

It is acknowledged that geisha has sparked and amended various cultural and character values which are still existing in the current Japanese society. However, geishas have been configured as performing a very minor role in the community because their physical appearance is almost ‘invisible’. As a part of traditional cultural and educational values, the life of ‘modern’ geisha has been justified as one of the ways to keep and sustain Japanese old tradition which have become the basis of most educational practices (Hutchinson, R., and Williams, M. 2006).

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