

Defining the Japanese Gaze on India in Postwar Fiction: Analysis of Mishima Yukio's *Hōjō no Umi*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring to light the fictional portrayal of India in a work of postwar Japanese novel-*Hōjō no Umi* (Sea of Fertility), 1970, which paved the way for other works of contemporary Japanese fiction to follow a similar model of depiction of India, such as *Fukai Kawa* (Deep River) by Endo Shūsaku, 1993. The images employed by the author Mishima Yukio in the novel *Hōjō no Umi* are instrumental in painting a picture of India in not just the eyes of readers of the novel, but also in the minds of contemporary Japanese writers. The paper illustrates the significance of the novel in providing the framework of motifs that are employed to portray India in fiction, through the many images used by the author, which influenced later fictional representations of India, as described above.

Keywords: India, Image, Literature, Mishima Yukio, postwar

Introduction

Looking at India through the lens of a post-war Japanese novel *Hōjō no Umi* (Sea of Fertility), this paper attempts to bring to light India's portrayal in the novel written by Mishima Yukio, which may have paved the way in influencing India's Image in modern and contemporary Japanese fiction in later works as well. India in Post-war Japanese literature finds mention in only few works of fiction, and in some travelogues, and verse.

This paper attempts to bring to light the unique gaze of Japan on India through one of the novels of Japanese fiction by Mishima Yukio that may have set the benchmark in portraying India, for other Japanese writers to follow suit in contemporary Japanese literature. The perspective this paper offers, is that of understanding the Image of India through the fictional discourse in the novel, which in turn largely defined the way India finds mention in later works of modern and contemporary Japanese literature such as *Fukai Kawa* (Deep River) by Endo Shūsaku, 1993. The key focus of this paper is in seeking to understand the gamut of motifs that the author employs and associates with India, thereby painting a picture of India and Indian people, which is deeply connected to religion and spirituality in the Japanese mind. The paper also underlines the significance of studying fictional (textual) representations of a nation and brings to light how Mishima's fictional representation of India in *Hōjō no Umi*, the novel discussed in this paper, may have created a prototype of representing India for Japanese authors.

Hōjō no Umi (Sea of Fertility)

Hōjō no Umi comprises of four novels, namely *Haru no Yuki* (1969), *Honba* (1969), *Akatsuki no tera* (1970) and *Tennin gosui* (1971). The four-volume work has been translated as *Sea of Fertility* into English and the four parts of the tetralogy are, *Spring Snow* (1972), *Runaway Horses* (1973), *Temple of Dawn* (1973) and *The Decay of the Angel* (1974) respectively in English translation. The four volumes have very different themes, briefly described as follows.

Hōjō no Umi is a novel that deals with various philosophical concepts of transmigration, rebirth, Storehouse consciousness (*Alaya vijnāna*), and the novel-which consists of four volumes, unfolds in the three countries of Japan, Thailand and India. India finds a significant mention in the third volume of the tetralogy -*Akatsuki no Tera* (*Temple of Dawn*). In the third volume, the author grapples with the concept of 'Nihilism', at the end, and poses a question to the protagonist Honda Shigekuni, if all the incarnations of his friend Kiyooki Matsugae that he had witnessed, were after all just illusions, since there was no other witness to them, other than Honda.

Known to put in systematic research into the novels he writes, Mishima undertook a journey to India before he wrote the novel. Mishima's travel to India was for the duration of half a month in 1967. In this paper, Honda, the protagonist's journey to India is what is analyzed. The author is known to have not just undertaken the journey himself and dedicated a major portion of his last novel to India but owing to his 'understanding' of India, he also recommended the place as one to seek spiritual solace to his contemporaries such as Yoko Tadanori. Further, his portrayal of India in *Hōjō no Umi* influenced Endo Shūsaku in choosing India as the location for his last novel *Fukai Kawa* as well. The paper argues that *Hōjō no Umi* and Mishima's reading and portrayal of India in it, have contributed to largely defining the array of motifs associated with India and her portrayal in Japanese literature (fiction) in modern and contemporary times.

Defining India as the 'Other' for Japan

Tsuruta Kinya has predominantly categorized image of foreigners under two major heads of being objects of 'unqualified abhorrence' or 'unequivocal admiration'. (1998, pp. 49-79) What stance does Japan's *Hōjō no Umi* assume when portraying India?

Hōjō no Umi is a tetralogy of four volumes strung together by the theme of rebirth and reincarnation spanning nearly fifty years starting from 1912 to 1960 in the protagonist Honda Shigekuni's life. In the first volume, *Haru no Yuki* (*Spring Snow*), the pivotal character of Kiyooki Matsugae dies at the young age of twenty, while leaving a note for his friend Honda Shigekuni that he would meet under a waterfall. In the second volume *Honba* (*Runaway Horses*), the reincarnation of Kiyooki Matsugae is Isao who is a militarist and political fanatic during the Nineteen hundred thirties in Japan. In the next volume *Akatsuki no tera* (*Temple of Dawn*), Isao is reincarnated as a Thai princess Ying Chan during the pre and post war Japan. The last volume *Tennin Gosui* (*Decay of the Angel*) has Yasunaga Toru as the reincarnation, who is a vile, selfish and an evil orphan adopted by Honda Shigekuni in the work which is set in Japan of the Nineteen hundred sixties and shows Honda's eagerness to see if he is indeed the reincarnation of the Thai princess.

Besides the fact that each of the pivotal characters in the four volumes are reincarnations of a character from the previous work in the series, the sole witness to all these reincarnations who is present through the four volumes and provides a continuous account of his association

with all these four character in one way or the other is Honda Shigekuni, the protagonist of the novel.

India – The realm of the unknown

India finds mention in *Hōjō no Umi* through a) Concrete Images such as places and people, b) Abstract images such as concepts and treatises from India for the purpose of analysis.

“Honda plans his visit to Ajanta Caves, Benaras on the banks of river Ganges, which were so far apart that he felt ‘faint’. Yet each attracted equally the magnetic needle of his ‘desire for the unknown’” is how the novel described Honda’s response to his India trip.

The author Mishima starts by portraying India as a land which is in the realm of the ‘unknown’ and which may be discovered in due course. The itinerary of Honda includes a visit to Calcutta, Benaras, and the Ajanta caves in Aurangabad. Honda’s visit to Calcutta is timed in a month when Calcutta is bustling most with activity in the month of October for ‘Durga Festival’.

Intertwining religiosity with Indian cities of Calcutta, Benaras and Ajanta

Honda reaches Calcutta in the end of October when the city of Calcutta is in the middle of festive fervor of the *Durga* Festival. Mishima describes how Goddess *Kali* has many forms, one of them being *Durga* who is worshipped especially in Bengal and Assam. Goddess *Kali* is described in detail in *Akatsuki no Tera* as an important Goddess in the Hindu pantheon of Gods and is especially revered in the states of Bengal and Assam. The Goddess *Durga* is described as one of the *avatars* of Goddess *Kali*, the latter being the more bloodthirsty, and fiery of them and *Kali* as an embodiment of *Shakti*. *Shakti* is conceived of either as the paramount goddess or as the consort of a male deity, generally *Shiva*. People of spiritual disposition worship *Shakti* as the divine will, the divine mother who calls for absolute surrender

The Goddess *Kali*, the most popular of the Hindu pantheon and especially venerated in Bengal and Assam, had innumerable names and avatars, as did her husband *Shiva*, the god of destruction. *Durga* is one of *Kali*’s metamorphoses...(2001,p.52)

The action in Calcutta centers on the *Durga* festival, which gives special importance to the various festivities and rituals associated with the event from the sacrifice of animals to the festive fervor and crowds of the place.

Calcutta is the center of *Kali* worship, with its temple, the *Kalighat*; and the activity there during these festivals defies imagination. ... The core of *Kali* is *shakti*, the original sense of which is “energy”. 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. (p.53)

This Goddess and her depiction are significant especially because she has found a place later in Endō Shusaku’s work *Fukai Kawa* as well.

Kalighat is shown as a melting pot of people from all walks of life in huge numbers. The beggars who beg for alms, the devotees who throng to the temple, all come together to the temple which Honda witnesses on a rainy day. The sheer numbers of people who jostle in the crowds and are all there to worship the Goddess *Kali* is a sight to behold for Honda.

He describes how a young man skilled at beheading the offering of the goat, goes about his job in a very skillful way, with no emotion or remorse. How he holds the goat, beheads it and lets the head roll, while the goat is still kicking its hind legs is all described in a matter of fact way, while admiring the young man's skill at the sword for delivering such a precise and accurate blow on the goat to deliver it to painless death. Honda witnesses Holiness in such goriness, in a scene, laden with perspiration, and blood, and yet a sight which did not even get a second glance perhaps from the usual worshippers.

In the author's own words, describing the atmosphere after a sacrifice has been made,

"Holiness dripped in the most ordinary way, like perspiration, from the depths of his deep clear eyes, and from his large, peasant like hands. The festivalgoers, accustomed to the sight, did not even turn around"...(p.56)

All that Honda sees and what Mishima describes in the scene at *Kalighat* may be a usual and rather commonplace scene for any Indian who has frequented the place herself. In contrast to the extremely emotionless act of beheading the animal as witnessed by Honda, Mishima contrasts the internal turmoil of emotions. The vividness of the whole experience is what takes Honda aback making him wonder if it was all but an illusion. The sight of the sacrifice does not leave Honda's mind and keeps coming back to him through his trip to Benaras as well. As Mishima describes it, the visit to *Kalighat* was just the precursor to what Honda was to experience thereafter in Benaras.

Benaras is the second place that Honda visits in India. It is described as a 'Holy city of the Hindus' and as 'Jerusalem of the Hindus'. Mishima has researched the history of the city and describes the city as the place, which receives the Ganges that flows down from Himalayas, the residence of Lord *Shiva*. The city is described as one that is dedicated to *Shiva*, the husband of *Kali*. After touching upon the mythological origins of the place, Mishima talks about how the city is a place where pilgrims from all over the country congregate. He describes it in *Akatsuki no Tera* as *tengoku heno shumon* (2002,p. 74), which has been translated as 'The main portal to paradise.' (Saunders and Cecilia, 2001) He continues by saying that 'Benaras is as Holy as the heavens and even describes how Benaras is revered as even holier than the heavens themselves.'

The Benaras that Honda encounters is a 'city of extreme filth as well of extreme holiness.' Mishima brings about the ultimate dichotomy of the place through this description in *Akatsuki no Tera* as follows.

...Yet, Benaras was a city of extreme filth as well as of 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. (p.59)

He is appalled at himself at how he had gone there against all strands of reason. For Honda, Benaras was a place where one had to 'abandon all reason'. He was afraid his reason might, like the sharp edge of some knife he alone concealed in his jacket, slash his perfect fabric.

The important thing was to discard it. The edge of the knife of reason, which he had regarded as his weapon since youth, had barely been preserved, considering the nicks already inflicted on it by each substantiation of transmigration. Now he had no choice but to abandon it unperceived in the perspiring crowds covered with germs and dust. (p.60)

Mishima describes the *Dasāsvamedha ghat*, and describes sights of the many riverbanks for their architecture, the widows' home where women come and wait for death, of the ill and diseased people from all over India.

The *Manikarnika ghat* is where Honda witnesses 'ultimate purification.' This is the *ghat* of cremation. Mishima continues to describe the rituals for men and women for cremation, stating that while for the former they were wrapped in a white cloth, for the latter they were wrapped in a red cloth. The noise, chatter and activity of children and the hustle and bustle of people around however, is not affected by the solemnity of the place.

He describes in detail the crackling sounds produced when the bodies are cremated. And surprisingly for Honda, there was no sadness or remorse but happiness.

There was no sadness. What seemed heartlessness was actually pure joy. Not only were *samsāra* and reincarnation basic belief, but they were actually accepted as a part of nature, constantly renewing itself before one's eyes, the rice paddy and its growing plants, the trees bringing forth their fruit.

In India, 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. (p.67)

The belief of Indian people in notions of *samsāra*, which is an eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth and reincarnation seemed very strong. Honda found this joy and happiness incomprehensible as a Japanese. And then what shocked and overwhelmed his senses was the moment when a white cow turns towards him and looks him in the eye. Cow, a sign of sacredness in India was what stood out against the blackness behind it. The sight seemed to capture the contradicting and yet coexisting truths of the sights and sounds that Honda had experienced so far.

Honda's experience at the *ghats* is one that haunts him in his dreams as well with Goddess *Kali* appearing in it. Another thing that Honda dreamt of was that the cycle of *samsāra* that Honda had witnessed was something that Indians seemed aware of at a sub-conscious level. He felt that the concepts of *karma*, reincarnation and *samsāra* were those, which could not be understood by ordinary reasoning, but only by possessing some kind of a 'supernatural power', one that Indians seem to possess. Belief in the inevitability of the cycle of life and death seemed to make Indians so listless and resigned in Mishima's understanding. It is interesting at the same time to note as he himself says that all these are impressions of a mere traveller.

Unlike the two centres of Hindu religion-Calcutta and Benaras, the third stop that Honda makes is at Aurangabad, to see the *Ajanta Ellora* cave paintings. Mishima gives details of how only some of the caves of the total of twenty-seven were of the age of *Hinayana* Buddhism while the majority, were of the age of *Mahayana* sect of Buddhism. Honda felt destined to come to this Buddhist site after having visited the religious heartland of Hindus in India.

The place with relative quiet and calmness especially after the shocking experience at Benaras brought some peace and calm. He felt that things were normal here when compared to Benaras. He liked the plains and also the fact that he was entering a space, which was associated with Buddhism. What he could not leave behind however was noise, and 'black' people hustling with activity, which was characteristic of Benaras as well at a tea stall on way to *Ajanta*. Neither could he escape the filth and swarms of flies.

He is met with misty and dark interiors where he sees at a figure of the Buddha seated in the lotus posture and many more figures of women wearing sarongs and colorful clothing, most of them holding the lotus flower in their hands. Honda was keen to see the *vihārī*. The absence of any object or thing and color and relative peace and calm, relaxed Honda's senses. He experienced an emptiness, which he felt was a foreboding of something very happy and exciting that he would come upon.

India's Significance to the novel

Mishima's choice of places for Honda to visit is Calcutta, Benaras and Ajanta. If one thinks of what these signify, it is interesting to note that while from Calcutta and Benaras he chooses for Honda to witness Holiness through the mother figure of *Kali* and the *ghats* of Ganga; the last stop at Ajanta caves, where he finally finds some peace is associated with Buddhism.

Kali for Mishima was a source of power and cruelty, of an energy that she embodied not in a soft feminine way but rather in a fiery and bloody way. He describes at length the way in which the Goddess receives her sacrifices, which are offered. The bloodiness of the act as witnessed by Honda is described almost deliberately against the backdrop of bustling worshippers who are almost oblivious to the act, and take it as something natural.

Much in a similar way, Mishima chooses to depict Benaras by details of dirt, death, filth, crowds, and everything that to a Japanese would seem 'naturally' antithetical to Holiness and purity. He describes the act of ablution that worshippers indulge in at the *ghats*, at sunrise in the river Ganges, alongside the cremation of bodies.

The duality of life and death, of filth and purity, is made evident. The point that he seems to suggest through the novel at both Calcutta and Benaras, is that Indians seem to be aware of the inevitability of *Samsāra*, *Karma* which is why he thinks they look listless and very resigned to destiny.

If one looks at what aspects of Benaras he chooses to portray then, it's the scene at the *ghats* that is Mishima's focus, especially Manikarnika *ghat*. Other than that the description is generic when it comes to people referring to them as black people, and the din of the place and crowds, which characterizes his experience in India, other than in Ajanta.

India triggers reflection and thought

The visit to India also builds the background for the discussion of reincarnation and *Yūshikiron* (Storehouse consciousness) that Mishima takes up in the novel. Benaras can be said to have acted as the platform where Honda witnesses the co-existence of life and death of filth and Holiness, and where he is made aware of the Indian awareness of the inevitability of *Samsāra*.

Even though Calcutta and the Goddess *Kali* and *Durga* are described, besides the fact that both left a lasting impression on Honda, the two motifs cannot be considered 'focal' to the plot of the four-volume novel. However India's presence adds credibility to themes of reincarnation and rebirth that Mishima discusses at length in the novel. In *Ajanta* Mishima says that he feels at peace, perhaps a reiteration of how Buddhism holds an appeal to him more than the Hinduism which he witnessed in very shocking forms of blood, filth, gore of sacrifice, and of the scenes of the pyres of cremation. Perhaps owing to the briefness of his visit to Calcutta and Benaras, made

it difficult for Honda to see through dirt, and chaos of the surface to explore and experience something deeper.

Themes that intertwine with the plot and story of the novel are those of *tensei* (rebirth) and *rinne* (transmigration), which Mishima the author has closely woven into the plot and story of the novel.

It is in India that Honda observes, perceives, thinks, and reflects on the very many facets of Buddhism, life, and reincarnation. Japan associates India with the birthplace of Buddha even during the modern times. The strategic location of Japan in Asia, as a developed modern nation like the West after the World War gives a unique perspective to Japan of being an outsider to India when aligning herself with the West.

Buddhism has been responsible in establishing India as a spiritual land in the fictional Japanese imagination, and its association with the religion perhaps overpowers other developments of India finding its feet post Independence in 1947 as a newly born nation. Even as the term used to refer to India in the modern times has changed from *Tenjiku* to *Indo*, the Images that *Indo* bring, by authors such as Mishima in fiction, associate India predominantly with religion and spirituality.

Japanese people have shown an avid interest in books on religions of Asia, and spirituality especially in the 1970s, what may be termed as an esoteric wave as mentioned by Lisette Gebhardt. A representative name of this genre of writing is Yoko Tadanori who was an artist and whose travelogue to India namely *Indo e* (My Journey to India) in 1966 seeking something *chō-shizenteki* (Super natural). It is noteworthy here that it was Mishima Yukio who influenced Tadanori that made the latter take up his journey to India. The one aspect of India, which was important for Tadanori was the connection that Indian systems of beliefs had with the 'supernatural', which is supposed to have been the case for Mishima as well who recommended him the journey to India. Mishima in turn had undertaken his journey to India in the year 1967 looking for roots of Japanese culture in India. Mishima was in turn influenced by the Beatles' visit to India in 1965 to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Ashram, news that caught the attention of Japanese people at large and Mishima alike. (Gebhardt, 2012:556-557)

Mishima's own trip to India before he wrote the novel, was the basis of India's portrayal in the novel *Hōjō no Umi*, which in turn influenced Endo Shūsaku in choosing India as a destination for his last novel *Fukai Kawa* (Deep River), another noteworthy work of modern Japanese literature that uses India as a platform to unfold.

As seen above, the post-war novel discussed in this paper, has elaborate descriptions of religious and spiritual places such as Benaras, Calcutta (*Kalighat*), and Ajanta. Interestingly, there has been no meaningful interaction, with even a single Indian person in the novel. This may also be because of how Japanese people prefer to travel in groups. As Nakane has put forth her argument in *Japanese Society* the average Japanese would most likely not interact with a local and stay in his own group when visiting a foreign country because travelling alone causes them to not just feel lonely but insecure in the absence of the group. Besides they do not expect help from 'outsiders; who do not know them.

Conclusion

It is felt that the study of a foreign literature for Images of one's own nation is significant in not only contributing to understanding of the other and the self in a foreign literature, but also in

bringing about some kind of an evaluation of the literature of another country from an outsider's perspective. It is felt that this study helps to look at what aspects of India, Japanese literature, a work of mainstream Japanese fiction chooses to portray, thereby throwing light on what aspects of India, Japan is interested in, giving an insight into not just India but also Japan in some ways.

Hōjō no Umi reaffirms the inseparable association of Indian motifs and religiosity and spirituality in a way that establishes the long held perception in Japanese minds about India. India has been understood as the birthplace of Buddhism, one of the major religions of Japan even today. The association of not just Buddhist, but religious motifs from Hinduism such as worship of Goddess Kali and the Holy river Ganges have given the modern Japanese writers a range of motifs to associate India with, and a sort of a template to follow, when portraying India as well. This can be established as mentioned in the paper, to a novel of contemporary times *Fukai Kawa* (Deep River), 1993 that borrows heavily from these depictions of India and the author of the latter work has also acknowledged the sameⁱⁱ.

India by Mishima, is portrayed as an 'unknown realm' comparable to the erstwhile image of *Tenjiku* (Paradise) connoting a far off land, a word that Japanese people employed to refer to India, till the time when India came under the British rule and was a subjugated nation.

Further the paper asserts how *Jishō*, which may be translated as 'self-reflection' has been an intrinsic aspect of travel and diary accounts since the Middle Ages in Japan wherein a traveller reflects on many aspects of life based on his experiences in travel. In the novel *Hōjō no Umi* the protagonist of the novel, Honda uses India as a platform to reflect on various things such as Buddhist concepts, and spirituality as a result of his travel to India. The portrayal of the various Indian images as seen through the protagonist Honda's eyes, become a trigger for him to think and reflect on India, and further more on the various treatises and principles of Buddhism that he had read. This is a pattern that is important to note, for it has set a framework for other significant portrayals of India in modern Japanese fiction as well, as a the far off land of religiosity and spirituality (Oriental) which is difficult to understand in its totality but perhaps a means to find deeper meaning in than what may meet the eye.

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