

Mind To Heart:

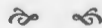
Japan's 20th Century Cultural Transition from Ogai to Toyoda

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Abstract:

At the time of Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival, it became evident that Japan's relative isolation from the world was at its conclusion. The next hundred years would bring tremendous change, and by the late-nineteenth century, Japan had established its world-wide presence only to have its global aspirations crushed by the end of World War II. One must take into account the collective efforts of the populace when accounting for this country's sudden rise. This culture's mindset assimilated quickly to the influences of the West. Despite the demoralizing defeat in World War II that scarred the nation, Japan's people emerged more resilient and passionate than before. This is especially evident in the arts produced during this time period. Following its own Enlightenment, the populace experienced Romantic and Modern movements within a fraction of the time of its Western counterparts. Mori Ogai's Romantic novel, *The Wild Geese*, provides a picture of the early Meiji culture, heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought. The transition from rational collective mindset to the postwar population's passionate individuality is evident in Shiro Toyoda's film adaptation, *The Mistress*. Toyoda's masterpiece provides a touching vision of how the individual's heart could now take flight in this new era.



“Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in night: God said, Let Newton be! – and all was light,” was the epitaph penned by the great eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope, while reflecting on civilization in the wake of this intellectual titan.¹ During this time reason, derived from critical thinking, had become the primary source of truth and morality for Western society. A

1 Henry Philip Dodd, *The Epigrammatists: A Selection from the Epigrammatic Literature of Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern Times* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1875), 329.

leading figure of Enlightenment thinking, philosopher Immanuel Kant believed the individual conscience had been emancipated in this “coming of age” with the dawn of the rational mindset, and he so exemplified this ordered way of thinking that he provided his fellow townsfolk with a means by which to set their clocks: “[e]very afternoon, precisely at three-thirty, Immanuel Kant left his house for his daily stroll.”² Yet, this newly formed critical mindset that appealed solely to reason was doomed from the outset, as it failed to recognize the unreasonable nature of emotions.

Enlightenment thinking had actually conditioned future generations to use the critical method against reason itself, and thus gave birth to Romanticism, which prized emotional consciousness over rational thought. At the core of this new Romantic trend was the belief that it was repressive and inaccurate to confine any assessment of humanity within the limits of reason. Early Romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that the sciences were actually a societal detriment, as they increased the powers of authority structures at the expense of individual freedom. From this perspective, the subsequent Romantic period in Europe was a movement driven by the passions of the masses as they confronted authority. Correspondingly, in nineteenth-century Japan, the influx of Western influences fostered a twentieth-century evolution of the culture's power dynamics by pitting the passions of the populace against the rationale of the entrenched authority's belief system. This essay will provide an analysis of this societal transition by investigating an important Japanese novel, *The Wild Geese* by Mori Ogai, and the postwar film adaptation of it that was released over four decades later, *The Mistress*. It will be demonstrated through the use of these cultural artifacts that the desires of the

2 Douglas J. Soccio, *Archetypes of Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2009), 314.

individual, and specifically those of repressed women, can no longer be bottled up in a postwar society by simple appeals to the rational. The evolution of the protagonist, Otama, from novel to film provides a microcosm of the changing culture and she embodies the postwar populace's sentiment when she trumpets, "I won't be in bondage anymore!"³ In concluding this essay, it will be demonstrated that the revolutionary changes in the West following the Enlightenment, and subsequently in twentieth-century Japan, were ultimately a societal movement from reason to passion—or mind to heart.

While Commodore Matthew Perry's "opening" of Japan to the Western world is certainly not comparable to the accomplishments of Newton, he, nonetheless, can be seen as a spark that would ignite an intellectual revolution. Japan's grand entry onto the world stage as the dominant Asian nation of the late-nineteenth century must be seen in the light of the nation's unique ability to assimilate Western thinking. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the underlying shifts in the domestic spheres during this historic period. Japanese tradition still cast a large shadow over the nation, but new technologies and railroads were connecting the urban to the rural peoples and encouraging the spread of ideas. Change came more rapidly and successfully to this nation than to any of its neighbors as Western ideas and literature flowed in. Enlightenment, Romanticism, and other genres of thought mixed with the traditional Japanese mindset, and began a societal transformation during the Meiji Restoration that would continue to the postwar-occupation era.⁴ Film critic Keiko McDonald remarks on this influence; "The Japanese are reading the likes of Shakespeare and Goethe, Ibsen and Wilde. Politicians are looking for ways to emulate the German legal system."⁵ The influx of the rational and the emotional happened in a fraction of the time as its Western counterparts, and the subsequent challenges to authority would bring major changes to a society steeped in the traditional. The seeds of Romantic rebellion germinated quickly in the fertile soil of critical thought and soon bore fruit in the arena of sexual equality, which is evidenced in the literature and film of this period.

Nowhere is the plight of repressed women better captured than in the 1911 novel, *The Wild Geese* by Mori Ogai, who is considered by many to be the first Japanese Romantic writer. Set in Japan's recent past of 1880, Ogai's novel gives us a glimpse of this transitioning Japanese culture. The novel introduces a variety of individuals, including university students, peasants, geisha, policemen, and sewing students to provide the reader with a flavor of this emerging modern nation-state. Ogai himself plays the narrator of the story as a fellow university student to one of the "wild geese," Okada. Along with Okada, the story revolves around a money lender (Suezo), his scorned housewife (Otsune), his mistress (Otama), and Otama's aging father. Otama is portrayed as the heroine who undergoes a change from mind to heart at the midpoint of the story. In writing this novel, Ogai had his finger on the pulse of his contemporary Japanese society; the fictional Otama's desire to be a free "bird" was mirrored by many feminists of the early twentieth century. In hopes of uniting

women against the authoritative society, feminist Yosano Akiko wrote of a common goal: "the liberty and perfection of women—that is, their joining in the establishment of a cooperative life both better and higher for all human beings."⁶ *The Wild Geese* engages with this feminist discourse by speaking out for Otama who embodies how "women in Japan were typically described as 'caged birds' or 'fragile flowers.' How, then to open the cage or protect the flower?"⁷

This question would be answered forty-two years later in Shiro Toyoda's film interpretation of Ogai's novel, *The Mistress*. The toppling of the Japanese regime by the Allied forces in World War II led to the institution of equality and empowerment for the women in government. In Toyoda's film, the heroine, Otama, is no longer resigned to suffer in silence. Like her contemporaries, she raises her voice in rebellion against the one who has caged her. This Romantic ideology of victim consciousness resonated strongly with the audience of postwar Japan. This criticism of authority is also found in the popular 1947 novel, *The Setting Sun*, by Osamu Dazai, when the character Kazuko speaks of a time when adults taught their children that revolution and love were evil. After the war, however, distrust of the former beliefs developed and Kazuko "came to believe that revolution and love in fact are the best and most delicious things in this life ... *Humans were born for love and revolution.*"⁸ Toyoda's film shows that the societal evolution evident in postwar Japan can be best realized when viewed from a perspective of the past. "Viewers in 1954 would have a natural and immediate interest in a more self-directed Otama, even one whose story still ends on the same old, same old note of tragic dependency, Meiji-style."⁹ This is illustrated in a scene where two students speak of Otama's plight and their own when one remarks, "There's no love for us or for her either. It's the Meiji Era."¹⁰ Toyoda's interpretive adaptation of *The Wild Geese* takes the passionate rebellion of postwar Japan, and infuses it in the heroine of an early Meiji story to elicit empathy from the audience. The audience no longer sees the mild resistance of Ogai's Otama, who remains a victim of the traditionalist society's mores. Instead, they can empathize with the emotional state of a woman who is unwilling to give up her dreams of liberation. "Toyoda also confounds another traditional expectation: that in classic Japanese films, *giri*¹¹ will always win out over *ninjo*¹²."¹³ Though *giri* may appear victorious in Toyoda's Otama, it is equally apparent that the modern heart refuses to play second fiddle to *ninjo*. *Giri's* triumph in Toyoda's film remains ambiguous.

In stark contrast, Mori Ogai's novel gives us a realistic look at unfulfilled love against the backdrop of the emerging modern

6 Laurel Rasplica Rodd, *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley, UC Press, 1991), 197.

7 Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 168-9.

8 John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 159-60.

9 Keiko I. McDonald, *Reading a Japanese Film* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 56.

10 Shiro Toyoda, *The Mistress* (Embassy Home Entertainment, 1953).

11 Social obligations

12 Individual feelings, often in opposition to social obligations.

13 William Johnson, "Toyoda and the Challenge of Representation." in *Film Quarterly* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 37.

3 Shiro Toyoda, *The Mistress* (Embassy Home Entertainment, 1953).

4 1868-1950.

5 Keiko I. McDonald, *Reading a Japanese Film* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 51.

nation-state in the midst of its own Enlightenment. After being tricked into a false marriage and losing her virginity, Otama is a young woman with few options to support herself and her elderly, ailing father. The result is that she becomes the bitter mistress of a despised and married usurer. Initially, the novel portrays Otama as outwardly unemotional and resigned to her fate and thus, exhibits the rational mindset of the era. "Resignation was the mental attitude she had most experienced. And in this direction her mind adjusted itself like a well-oiled machine."¹⁴ Yet, the novel doesn't leave us with an unchanged Otama in an evolving world. While staring out the window one day at the students who walk by, she has an epiphany—she has passions worth exploring. The narrative describes it as "an awareness of something sprouting inside her."¹⁵ This "embryo within her imagination had been conceived under the threshold of consciousness ... and she said to herself: 'That's the way you should feel.'"¹⁶ As she begins to recognize the liberated woman within, she begins to detach herself from her former way of life. Outwardly, she becomes more cordial to her patron, Suezo, but inwardly, "her heart more remote."¹⁷ She begins to feel that she owes Suezo no gratitude and even begins to despise him, fantasizing that a hero might save her. Unfortunately for Otama, the men of this story are all characters that fit the mold of the rational thinker, demonstrating that in this Meiji culture no hero exists to rescue her.

We see Okada, the young medical student and Otama's love interest, as a product of this hero-less culture. Otama's dream is to be free, to fly away like the geese, much the way Okada does in his flight to Europe at the end of the movie. But the narrative reveals that while Okada may soar beyond the physical boundaries of his nation, he lacks the ability to transcend the rational mindset that defines his culture. He is unable or unwilling to express any kind of emotion to this woman who captures his mind but never enters his heart. Okada's mindset is grounded in the rational realm and it is no surprise that he bears a striking resemblance to Immanuel Kant's earthbound pattern of existence—"[a]fter supper he would take a walk and return without fail before ten ... the time never varied when he was in or out of his room. Often a boarder who had forgotten to set his watch by the signal gun at noon went to Okada's room to find out the time."¹⁸ Similarly, the lack of the heroic male figure capable of emotions is seen in Otama's oppressor, Suezo. He leads a life that is similarly structured around "shrewd, penny-pinching methods" and "his passion for order."¹⁹ Even Otama's father is seemingly unmoved by the discovery that he had been tricked into thinking Suezo was unmarried. Ignoring the plight of his daughter, he forgoes any protective paternal tendencies by rationalizing them away. Incapable of imagining any new culture emerging from the old tradition, he would rather "sit all day and read ... histories ... and biographies. If the keeper of the library showed him works of fiction and recommended them, the old man would say: 'What? Those lies!'"²⁰ Only Okada's fellow student,

as the narrator of this sad, hero-less tale, demonstrates that men of this period are capable of acknowledging the beating heart and recognize their flightless state.

The symbolism of the bird is important to understanding the novel's portrayal of Meiji society. It first appears as a pair of linnets in a cage that Suezo buys for Otama. At the turning point in the novel, a snake manages to slither into the cage and kill one of the two birds. Okada becomes Otama's hero by killing the snake and rescuing the other bird. There is more significance in what follows. While Okada is washing the blood off of his hands, the remaining linnet almost finds its freedom through the hole made by the snake. Okada immediately springs to action to make sure that this bird will not escape the cage. After washing his hands of the matter, both literally and figuratively, he repairs the prison so that this bird has no option but to live out its lonely, caged existence. The symbolism verifies the historical reality of women of this era, yet Otama, nonetheless, remains oblivious to this and continues to dream of a freedom to love. Seizing the opportunity when her patron leaves town for a day, she gets her hair done and waits for Okada to walk by. Otama's dream of a rendezvous is shattered when a visibly disturbed Okada simply quickens his pace and walks on by. Fittingly, at the prompting of a friend, Okada throws a rock at a goose and unintentionally kills it shortly after leaving Otama in the street. When Okada remarks, "Poor bird," initially, one might perceive that Okada speaks of Otama and the caged women of her era, not the bird.²¹ Still another occurrence of the bird symbolism is the figuratively caged heart. On the eve of Okada's departure to Europe, the reader becomes aware that Okada is not a wild goose, either. In the same manner that Okada blocked the linnet's freedom by tying shut the escape route in the cage, so has the rational mindset correspondingly restricted his own freedom to love Otama. Therefore, this constraint may be seen as a self-destructive act by one who will not allow his heart to take flight.

Arguably, Toyoda's use of film as a medium allows for a much more grand use of symbolism than what Ogai was capable of with the written word. Visual images allow viewers to instantly connect Otama's house to a prison; the windows and front doors have vertical slits through which we see her peeking as she plays the role of the caged bird. "Toyoda uses this physicality to hammer home the personal and social pain of being the unwilling concubine of a married usurer."²² Toyoda also expands greatly on the use of symbols to provoke a response from the postwar audience as he turns "objects such as food, a parasol, and a kimono into instruments of torture."²³ A first meal prepared for Suezo becomes a precursor of future violations as he insists on inserting a morsel of food into her mouth. The presents of a parasol and a kimono become roses with thorns as they are recognized by a jealous wife and a woman who is being extorted by the usurer. The expressions on the face of Otama induce empathy from an audience that understands the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the collective, which, in Otama's case, is her father. Toyoda's use of visual symbolism fuels the postwar

14 Ogai Mori, *The Wild Geese*, trans. Kingo Ochiai and Sanford Goldstein (1911; repr., Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1959), 47.

15 *Ibid.*, 76.

16 *Ibid.*, 76-7.

17 *Ibid.*, 77.

18 *Ibid.*, 14.

19 *Ibid.*, 33,71.

20 *Ibid.*, 99.

21 *Ibid.*, 112.

22 William Johnson, "Toyoda and the Challenge of Representation." in *Film Quarterly* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 37.

23 *Ibid.*, 37-8.

audience's desire to see Otama rebel passionately against Suezo and the society that seeks to cage her.

Toyoda's *The Mistress* succeeds in showing how rationalism is no longer invested with absolute authority over the individual as the mind is losing its grip on human passion. Throughout the film, the heroine Otama is repeatedly told to think rationally with her mind at the expense of her heart. At the start of the film, an advisor convinces her that becoming a mistress is her best option since she "can't be too choosy. Dreams, even empty dreams are for the young," is the message given by her neighbor.²⁴ Yet, in *The Mistress*, rational thought becomes demonstratively absurd. An example of this is a scene when the disgruntled wife is told by Suezo to consider how his infidelity is actually a good thing for her. "Think it over," Suezo says, "It's better for you. I haven't grown cold like other men."²⁵ By the midpoint of the film, a new birth occurs as Otama comes to realize how irrational it is to ignore her deep-seated emotions. She comes to the point where she can no longer bottle up her passion for freedom, despite the attempts of others to convince her to simply accept a logical life course. The final scene shows a defiant Otama refusing to obey her patron and running from the house. The audience is left knowing that Otama's dreams of flying away from her circumstances have been shattered, but they can see that her heart has been set free. Toyoda's radical elaboration of Ogai's story has touched the mood of his contemporary viewers while bringing it into the context of a not-so-distant past. Toyoda has put a new spin on an old story showing, through a representational fictional character, how the heart of a people has emerged scarred, but still beating. "This shift in emphasis makes sense, given that the novel's Meiji heroine 'lived' (so to speak) before war, defeat, and occupation had conspired to give Japan a new constitution guaranteeing women equal rights."²⁶

This touching film emerges as a cultural product of a nation that had reached a turning point. For much of the Japanese populace, there were distinctly new overtones in Emperor Hirohito's prerecorded radio announcement of surrender on August 15, 1945. Japanese historian Andrew Gordon describes the response; "Some of his stunned listeners would later recall that August noon as an instant of 'rebirth'... when past experience and values were rendered illegitimate."²⁷ What many heard was a clarion call to liberation and individuality. This was a shift of seismic proportions as a collective-thinking Japanese culture with "one hundred million hearts beating as one," became one where the individual could listen to their own heartbeat while still maintaining love for the nation.²⁸ This was one of the rare moments in human history where a people recognized the need to redefine themselves. The Japanese "people everywhere demonstrated relief at the collapse of the authoritarian state and receptivity to, or at least tolerance of, an immense variety of pleasures and activities."²⁹ The youth of Japan quickly embraced

the new freedoms emerging in their culture. Typically, marriages in middle- and upper-classes had been arranged based on some alleged suitability. But in postwar Japan, "the custom of dating had become popular among college youths and young workers in these years, and the word for *date* (deeto) was imported from the English. Gradually, but steadily, the ideal of the 'love marriage' won the day."³⁰ The dream of the nineteenth-century caged bird had become a reality in 1959, when the Crown Prince Akihito married a wealthy commoner.

Watching Toyoda's film, *The Mistress*, would have caused the postwar audience to consider how far removed they were from the days of the Meiji as they viewed a common girl's hope for love crushed by her society. In Toyoda's Otama, one can see that her heart refuses to be held captive any longer by societal expectations as she has experienced a "new birth." The themes alluded to in Ogai's prewar novel are more fully developed in Toyoda's film. Toyoda's *The Mistress* and Ogai's *The Wild Geese* are unique in that they both insert contemporary discourses into a not-so-distant historical context, thus demonstrating the radical changes to twentieth century Japanese society. Ogai's novel hints that there is clearly something new on the horizon with its portrayal of a woman who is entering an age of discovery as she walks out into the sun without raising her parasol, refusing any longer to live a sheltered life. Passion of the heart has emerged like a spring shoot to challenge the establishment's mindset. It blooms brilliantly in Toyoda's masterpiece as the viewer witnesses the postwar triumph of heart over mind, as the novel's counterpart chases her dream with reckless abandon despite the historical reality that a caged bird could not fly free in the days of the Meiji.

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24 Shiro Toyoda, *The Mistress* (Embassy Home Entertainment, 1953).

25 Ibid.

26 Keiko I. McDonald, *Reading a Japanese Film* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 55-6.

27 Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 226.

28 John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 122.

29 Ibid.

30 Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 258.