

Postmodernism in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

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Abstract

Japanese Modernism in the Taisho period (1912-1926) saw the literary innovations of Ryunosuke Akutagawa who belonged to a group of authors formed around the magazine, *Shinshicho*. Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove", published in 1922 and later adapted by Akira Kurosawa into the 1950 film *Rashomon*, records seven mutually irreconcilable accounts of a scene involving rape and murder. With the benefit of hindsight, this paper intends to argue that the short story, though a landmark in Japanese Modernism, anticipates Postmodernism in the history of Japanese literature with its experimental narrative technique. In the story, the seven warring accounts emphasize the subjective and fragmented experience of reality and the impossibility of an omniscient narrator, all of which are traits usually foregrounded in Modernist texts. Yet the story encroaches upon postmodernist territories by incorporating multiple points of view, unreliable narrators, nonlinear storytelling and absence of a singular or coherent "truth". While the testimonies of the witnesses, the confession of the rapist Tajomaru and the prayer of the survivor Masago set the story's realist trajectory, the last section with Masago's dead husband's words told through a medium subverts the realist bent and adds a supernatural quality to the story, using fabulation which postmodern magic realist narratives abound with. The story marks the loss of the real and the death of the author as its open-endedness allows readers to try filling the gaps with their own interpretation and bias. The portrayal of Masago is disparate in a way that it reinforces the patriarchal stereotypes and fantasies imposed on women, but also makes the readers think if they should "trust the victim". Akutagawa's classic short story, representative of his dismissal of metanarratives in his own literary career, thus plants the seeds of Postmodern fiction in the *annus mirabilis* of literary Modernism.

Keywords: Modernism, Akutagawa, Postmodern, post-truth, Metamodernism, *Modanizumu*



When Belarusian author Svetlana Alexievich won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, the media celebrated her feat as a long overdue acknowledgment of the literariness of recorded testimonies in the discipline of journalism or history. Though she is hailed as an ace investigative journalist and oral historian, she herself identifies with neither of these monikers. Svetlana considers her domain not to be reporting or historicizing, it is rather what has come to be termed "documentary literature" (Pinkham). Documenting historical facts requires the agent's subjective take on objective truth. In 1960s and 70s, the rise of Gonzo journalism popularized by Hunter S. Thompson or the somewhat similar advent of new journalism mastered by Tom Wolfe is founded on the very idea that journalists cannot eliminate their subjective point of view from the process of reporting. Such phenomenological intervention of the subject's consciousness accompanies ethnographic documentation as well. The ethnographer, reporter and witness cannot insulate their act of reproducing recorded facts from the open ended workings of their interpretive faculty. Human "beings" whose consciousness is predicted on thinking are bound inside their subjective cognitive processes.

The shift towards a subjective reconfiguration of reality added to the rejection of metanarratives and foregrounded the simulated nature of "truth" when a postmodern preoccupation subverted the hitherto traditional arcs of modernity and Modernism in the post-World War II cultural landscape. In 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of Modernism, Japan saw a cultural shift signalling the dawn of literary reinventions based on principles similar to Modernism. Precisely in 1922, Ryunosuke Akutagawa published his short story "In a Grove" which was later made into the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa in 1950. This paper intends to argue that Akutagawa's short story, while surfacing in the most memorable year of Modernism, anticipates literary Postmodernism.

During the high tide Western Modernism, Japan was ruled by Emperor Taisho. The Taisho period (1912-1926), alongside the later years of the Meiji period (1868–1912) and the early years of the Showa period (1926–89) mark the span of the Modernism in Japan. Due to cultural differences, William J. Tyler calls this movement/period "Modanizumu" to both relate it to and differentiate it from Western European Modernism. Tyler remarks, "Japanese-style modernism was pragmatic and powerful as a "new religion," kaleidoscopic and contradictory as an "ideology of no fixed positions," and independently minded and politically charged as *l'esprit nouveau*" (Tyler 19). Evidently, Modanizumu or Japanese Modernism, with its rejection of "fixed positions" anticipated much of the Postmodernist concerns.

In those years of thematic and stylistic experimentation in Japan, the Modernist innovator Ryunosuke Akutagawa belonged to the group formed around *Shinshicho* ("New Current of Thought"). Akutagawa's skepticism towards the optimist White Birch (*Shirakaba*) School, and the communist "Seed-Sowers" (*Tanemaku-Hito*), "Literary Battlefield" (*Bungei-Sensen*) and the Japan League of Proletarian Literature organized reveal his dismissal of metanarratives. His fascination with literature as a form of artistic expression relegates ideology wars and political philosophy to a secondary status in his oeuvre. Akutagawa can be called what Robert Scholes terms a "fabulator". In his *Fabulation and Metafiction*, Scholes identifies the fabulator as a Postmodernist storyteller who finds pleasure in the form of the story. Fabulators opt for metafictional storytelling to channel their inner skepticism towards metanarratives:

Specifically, what can writers do to confront this skepticism in their audiences and in themselves? Can one be suspicious of all "facts" and still have a care for "truth"? Or should one rejoice in freedom from "truth" and revel in the mendaciousness of "facts"? One response to this situation has been a "new" journalism that frankly asserts the personality of the journalist and focuses our attention on the process of mediation itself, as the writer struggles to make sense of the world with words, often through a haze of booze or drugs, sometimes in the throes of personal crisis, mental instability, anger, and shame. (Scholes 199)

In Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove", the narrative is set at the premise of the rape of Masago and the murder/suicide of her husband, Takejiro. The story itself is written as a compilation of seven mutually incompatible accounts. There are five testimonies: those of a woodcutter, a traveling Buddhist priest, a policeman, an old woman who is the mother of Masago, and the rapist, Tajomaru. Added to this is the confession or prayer of the sexual assault survivor, Masago, at a temple. The short story ends with Masago's dead husband's ponderings told through a conduit or medium. The testimonies of the witnesses are founded on a journalistic approach towards truth. All the characters are unreliable to an extent. The truth-claim of the witnesses is curbed by the limited access to the incident. The confession of Tajomaru represents the potential of the wilfully unreliable narrator as he, being the criminal, would try to portray himself as less guilty as possible. The prayer of Masago is delivered in a highly emotional state, to such an extent that feelings might mar the facts. The words of Takejiro take the story towards a fantastic realm, and his interpretation, too, relies on an impulsive reading of the incident. While "In a Grove" follows the Modernist notion of subjective conception of reality through the fragmented consciousness of the narrators, the seven accounts of the same incident become more challenging due to the multiplicity of points of view, unreliable narrators and the absence of a coherent "truth". The story looks straight ahead to a Postmodern audience. The polyphonic short story becomes an exercise in nullifying the textual contradictions to arrive at objectivity. The characters become readers of the incident in the story and try to fill in the gaps with their subjective takes on the objective textual reality. The readers of the text, in turn, become investigative journalists who question the characters to expose their limitations and biases, and try to resolve the contradictions, fill in more gaps and reach the "truth" of the incident. The story tests the reader's faculty of tolerating disparities.

Keats, interestingly, strikes a somewhat similar chord while propounding his idea of negative capability which occurs when one "is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" and "remaining content with half knowledge" (Scott 60). While the Romantics valued the senses and feelings, the Postmodernists zoom in on ideologies and textuality. Lyotard states, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard XXV). The objective is not so much to minimize the textual incongruity as to be tolerant of its abundance. Reality itself becomes a text which is thus created and maintained through contradictions. Robert Scholes succinctly captures the relationship between the reader and the textuality of the "real" and "literary" worlds in the twenty-first century: "We live in a textual reality. One does not have to be a French philosopher to know this. Most young people know it, whether they are fully conscious of this knowledge or not. And most of their elders know it, whether they care to admit it or not" (Scholes 76). Baudrillard

similarly believes that the real is always mediated through human cognitive processes and senses. Living in a world of simulacra, individuals are numbed towards the idea that it is simulated. At times, when one assumes that one has understood the real or fools oneself into believing that culture has a better understanding of reality, theory intervenes to complicate further the idea of the "truth". Theory works against resolving ambiguity and conflict, and in favour of breaking down metanarratives. Theory is a work in progress as it exists only by opposing its past achievements. Baudrillard dismisses the possibility of a knowable reality and proposes that human psyche is perpetually tied to a subjective vision which cannot glimpse the objective reality, if it at all exists. Applying Postmodern theory to Akutagawa's Modernist short story would then re-evaluate Akutagawa's commentary on the (im)possibility of unearthing the "truth".

Though none among Masago, Takejiro and Tajomaru refuses that Tajomaru raped Masago, of the most vivid uncertainties in the text surrounds the murder of Masago's husband, Takejiro. Tajomaru claims that he and Takejiro engaged in a battle for honour, and he defeated Takejiro. Tajomaru denies to have killed Takejiro and has "heard only a groaning sound from the throat of the dying man" (Akutagawa 99). According to Tajomaru, Masago escaped while he and Takejiro were fighting. Masago, on the other hand, claims that Tajomaru fled after sexually assaulting her. She chose to kill her husband to relieve him from seeing her dishonour: "Neither conscious nor unconscious, I stabbed the small sword through the lilac-coloured kimono into his breast" (100). Takejiro, on the other hand, says that Tajomaru ran after Masago who fled the scene to save herself, and it was he who killed himself: "I took it up and stabbed it into my breast" (102). The disparate accounts of the death of Takejiro pushes the narrative towards extreme incommensurability.

Unlike Blake's enunciation on innocence and experience which form a contrary, but not contradictory, duality under the rubric of Romanticism, the gamut of sentiments and ideologies related to Postmodernism abounds in mutual irreconcilability. While a realist or Romantic lens attempts to retrieve and represent the truth in an attempt to perfect the mimetic process, Postmodernism uproots the very claim that truth exists outside subjective perception. Romanticism did foreground the subjective "I" of poet-narrator, they emphasized its transcendental autonomy. On the other hand, the Modernists, with their narrative innovations as with the stream of consciousness, focused on the fragmented nature of this subjectivity, which, according to Freud, came with the appendage of the unconscious. The entropic nature of the human psyche was theorized by the Postmodernists as bricolage – the making of collage or photomontage. Bricolage reveals the incoherence that (de)constructs the "I". Developing the ideas of the Modernists, the Postmodernists argue that what the mind creates, and itself becomes, is an incongruous, discordant text. Art and literature overflow with the contradictions which dominate such textuality of the mind. In tandem with this is the slippery nature of the unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator subverts the truth-claim of the text in two different ways - there are accidental unreliable narrators who gain access to a particular extent of the narrative due to their spatio-temporal specificities and limited perspectives, and purposeful unreliable narrators whose motive guides their intervention in the text and does it only to manipulate, and maybe deceive, the reader. While the Modernists grappled with the conflicting essence of the psyche and tried to grasp it, the Postmodernists undermined the possibility of an essence, singularity or metanarrative in relation to the workings of the mind. Truth is political, it is not innocent, it is made by and mediated through the web of power



dynamics. Each narrator, each perspective, engages in a cat's cradle to build the text but in doing so, each of them tries to gain the upper hand. The meaning of the text and the trajectory of the narrative depend on how the reader makes sense of the open-ended text which is marked by multiplicity and varying, competing truths. The reader's point of view, bias and cognitive individuality fill in the gaps in the text. Christopher Butler notes how the "disruption of any temptation to settle for a familiar world, as opposed to a confrontation with the disturbing qualities of a Barthesian one, is central to" (Butler 66) the writings of Walter Abish. In Abish's *How German Is It?* (1980), the uncertainty of the narratorial voice, plot and so on keep the reader in a state of unrelenting skepticism. The author "by this technique makes us realize that we fill in the gaps in the text with our prejudices (or guilts)" (Butler 67).

This paper intends to re-contextualize Akutagawa's short story in not only a Postmodernist culture, but also the contemporary twenty-first century world. Almost a hundred years after 1922, cultural negotiations with Modernism and Postmodernism have catapulted the readers into a new identification of the contemporary. In 2010, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker attempted to theorize the contemporary age as one negotiating between the Modern and the Postmodern, and called it Metamodern. According to them, "Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker). This is not simply a Postmodern skepticism, it calls forth a sincerity with which one has to continue one's journey towards the potentiality of truth. Luke Turner, on a similar note, proclaims in *Metamodern Manifesto*: "We propose a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage. Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!" (Turner). In the contemporary post-truth and post-Me Too scenario, a feminist reading of "In a Grove" would ask the readers to "trust the victim". A radical re-reading of the short story would be to privilege Masago's confession or prayer over all the other perspectives. This is not to say that the incommensurability of the story can thus be eliminated. The same gesture, the same behaviour is interpreted differently by different characters in the story. While all the seven accounts are vying for validity, the words of the rapist and the husband, to an extent, reinforce patriarchal stereotypes and masculine fantasies regarding femininity. Tajomaru says, "She said it was more trying than death to have her shame known to two men. She gasped out that she wanted to be the wife of whichever survived...I wanted to make her my wife even if I were to be struck by lightning" (Akutagawa 99). Masago's husband, Takejiro, on the other hand, regards every action of Masago with jealousy and rage, and views her as a *femme fatale*: "She had never looked so beautiful as at that moment" (101). Next, assuming that she has agreed to be Tajomaru's wife, and asked Tajomaru to kill him, Takejiro utters scornfully, "Has such a hateful thing come out of a human mouth ever before? Have such cursed words ever struck a human ear, even once?" (102). Masago is viewed as an unstable woman who makes erratic decisions. Rape itself is fetishized by both her husband and the rapist. Both the men attempt to prove their machismo.

The text, thus, brings the readers at the crossroads of critique and postcritique. Postcritique is what can deal with a text in the Metamodern age, if one can call it so

following Vermeulen and van den Akker. Instead of "excavating" the "truth", the reader can focus on the aesthetics of the process of reading. The phenomenological process of reading involves a response to the affective dimension of the text, a philosophical engagement with the act of reading itself and a re-evaluation of the reader's own predicament, not only ideological but also emotional. One can have a reading of one's own.

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