

*Awakening from Dream, Back to the Pre-Modern: Satoh Makoto's
"The Dance of Angels Who Burns Their Own Wings"*

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Abstract

Japanese playwright and stage director Satoh Makoto (shows an acute insight that human suffering is the outcome of the illusion of human redemption that has been regarded as an ultimate goal of the linear time-space of the modernity. The linear time-space has killed the existence of God by replacing the multi-layered time-space of the pre-modern world in which the living and the spirits of the dead coexisted and the communication between the two worlds was possible. In the secular modern world with the belief in God removed, human suffering had a tendency of permanence in the lack of the savior. This is the human condition that Satoh understands. In his play *The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings* (1970), especially in the three-fold dream text, Satoh puzzles out such human condition as suffering. He reaches to a conclusion that human desire for redemption or revolution in the modern world turns out endless dreams or illusions. As a strategy to break the chain of nightmarish human condition, he takes a decisive action to cut off the access to the first dream. Accordingly, Satoh attempts to quit the linear dimension of time-space as the outcome of modernization or westernization, and instead turn back to the multi-layered dimension of the pre-modern Japanese world, which is symbolically and effectively carried out in both dramaturgy and space-plan for stage performance.

Keywords: Satoh Makoto, *Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings*, Japanese theatre, dream text, modernity, the premodern paradigm

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Introduction: from Modern to Pre-modern

Japanese pre-modern theatre was the world in which the living and the dead were getting together. As seen in the world of Noh and Kabuki, the Japanese pre-modern stage was a kind of sacred shrine and religious rituals were set up to appease the divinity and pray for human welfare as rewards. The performance here was not only the entertainment for the living but also a religious rite of *chinkon*, that is, pacifying the spirits of the dead.¹ The performer in this place served as shaman who invokes a blessing from the spirits of the dead and brings the blessing to the living, as the medium between the two worlds. The pre-modern Japanese theatre was fundamentally multi-layered time-space. Here the historical time and the present crossed or fused each other. Here the rule of linear or chronological time lost its presence and meaning.

With the introduction of a world-wide upheaval of the Western-modernization in the late 19C, the entire Japanese world was placed in a critical condition. The Japanese theatre space was accordingly sucked into a sea change. The Japanese theatre, now granted a new label called 'modern,' was thrown into a secular world. Here the spirits of the dead are excommunicated, and only the livings are fussing about trifles. There exists nothing but an endless human suffering without the hope of the blessing from God.² Meiji government's adoption of the Western-modernization in 1868 was not unlike the acceptance of the world without God. Accordingly the Japanese modern stage was earthly and mundane with the chance of God's appearance and the subsequent encounter of God and human beings on stage becomes 'THE THING IMPOSSIBLE'. Now the Japanese modern theatre, just as the Western counterpart did, became a secular stage saturated with the optimistic belief that scientific thought and human rationality, independent from God, will make their life happier and more comfortable, and finally relieve themselves from the suffering.

However, the belief in scientific thought and technology turned out to a detonator rather than a solution to the human suffering. Especially, the atomic bombing onto Hiroshima and Nagasaki came out at the culmination of technology and the consequent blind optimism about the modernity. In the post-war era, disappoint from

¹ The act of *chinkon* is one aspect of paradigm in the pre-modern Japanese world. It is a technique of traditional shamans to manipulate the spirits. This technique contains a phase transformation through which the spirits borrow the body of shamans and present themselves in the world of the living. *Chinkon* is possible in the premise that the existence of the spirits or the dead is believed in the world of living. In this respect, ancient Greek and Roman theatres also had the dimension of *chinkon* in that they were religious rites to celebrate the gods for the purpose of human welfare in the living world.

² Realistic and naturalistic theatres were the outcome of the Western modernization. As the basic tool for realism and naturalism in theatre, scientific outlook restricted the pursuit of truth to the knowledge verified only through the five senses and direct observation. Accordingly, the realism playwrights denied illogical and supernatural values and wrote about what can be discovered in everyday life. Moreover, naturalist writers argued that theatre should show only a slice of life on stage. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, actions are carried out in a segment of reality including living room and kitchen from which God is expelled.

and skepticism about the optimistic agenda led the Japanese young generation to the question about the Westernization or modernization. These young Japanese showed a tendency of bringing back the God to this secular stage as a way to liberate themselves from their existential or absurd condition of 'no way out' situation. Accordingly, they turned their eyes back to the pre-modern world: the world where the living and the dead are getting together; the world where the past and the present coexist.

It was no exception to the Japanese young generation theatre in the 1960s. They looked upon the theatre as the ground of searching for a solution that would liberate humans from the suffering. Accordingly, these young men were determined to return to the Japanese pre-modern stage. Among them was Satoh Makoto. In a series of theatre works with *My Beatles*, *Nezumi Kozō*, and *The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings* (*Tsubasa o moyasu tenshi-tachi no butō*, 1970), Satoh experimented going back to multi-layered dimension of the pre-modern theatre and consequently bringing God's world back to the secular modern stage. *The Dance of Angels* is the most remarkable play. Unlike the others that stay at the analysis of cause of the human condition of the modern era, this play shows a more active and positive attempt to suggest a practical strategy to breakthrough the problem analyzed through the former works.

A Dream Within a Dream Within a Dream

Satoh's play *The Dance of Angels*, as a critical response to German playwright Peter Weiss's play *Marat/Sade*, questions the western sense of revolution and finds it lacking (Cody and Sprinchorn 1193). The play begins with the words on the screen appearing from the dark and silence. It says "THIS IS A DREAM" (302). The dream text in the play serves as the playwright's self-conscious strategy to break with the modern or westernized dimension and consequently get back to the pre-modern Japanese dimension in which logical and lineal flow of time-space is replaced by the multi-layered time-space and the worlds of the living and the dead are fused each other. Such a dream structure in the play reminds what Swedish playwright August Strindberg mentioned a half century ago in the preface to drama *The Dream Play* (1902). He explains:

In this dream play [...] Anything can happen; everything is possible and plausible. Time and space do not exist. Upon an insignificant background of real life events the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experience, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations [...] The characters split, double, redouble, evaporate, condense, fragment, cohere. (205)

Strindberg seeks a meaning in an incomprehensible universe, trying to reconcile disparate or opposite elements: lust and love, body and spirit, filth and beauty that were categorized by the modern principle of dichotomy. In his dream play, space shifts regardless of logical sequence, chronological time is broken, the real and the imaginary merge, and the depersonalized characters possess allegorical names like the Stranger, the Student, the Poet, the Hunter, and the Dreamer (Brustein 123).

Satoh's dream play also denies a logical flow of time and space, and the characters are depicted as depersonalized: the Winds, the Angels, and the Birds. Nevertheless, Satoh goes beyond the blind imitation of the dream text foreshadowed by the Western forerunner Strindberg. In *The Dance of Angels* Satoh experiments the dream text as a space-time where, as Strindberg says, "anything can happen" and "everything is possible and plausible" on one hand. Also, Satoh adds more complexity to the dream structure of his play by weaving it into a unique framework of 'a dream within a dream within a dream.' Satoh's play begins with the episode of historical figures Marat and Sade whose dream of revolution end in failure. It turns out that their dream was nothing but the dream of the Angels, another group of characters in the present, whose dream of human redemption also proves to be a failure. It turns out again that Marat and Sade's dream of revolution and the Angels' dream of human redemption are no other than the projection of the original dreamer, the King of the Birds. Through the whole structure of triple-dreams, raging from the past and to the present, Satoh discloses that the human redemption and revolution has been just an illusion. Arriving at this moment, Satoh takes a drastic action to break with the illusion, which is the awakening from the dream.

Topography of the Dream Text

Related to the multi-folded flow of dream structure, as facilitated by the projecting action of a dreamer, the 'dream within a dream within a dream' procedure in *The Dance of Angels* reminds of the three-step stages of 'desire theory' that French poststructuralist Jacques Lacan developed based on the Freud's interpretation of dreams. Lacan formulates the desire theory beginning with a concept of 'mirror stage.' According to him, an infant perceives itself as whole in a mirror's reflection. The infant makes an imaginary identification with its reflection and takes this as a model for its interaction with the mother. However, later, the advent of a father figure breaks off this imaginary unity, from which the infant's desire for the mother is endlessly replaced with the mother-substitutes, not fully satisfied. In short, the Lacan divides the development process of human desire into three steps—imaginary, symbolic, and real stages—and explains the development from one to the next stage as the projection of a castrated desire to a substitute and the endless repetitions of castration and substitution. Applied to the Freudian-Lacanian concept of human desire, Marat-Sade and the Angels in Sato's play are interpreted as the King of Birds' alter-ego or projection of his castrated desire to disguised forms in his dream.

1) King's Dream: the Imaginary Stage

The first dream by the King of the Birds is equivalent to the imaginary stage of the Lacanian desire theory. In the play, the King dreams a dream of revolution or redemption of humanity. In the dream, he ceaselessly insists on the coming of morning by continuously requesting for morning teas. The King's desire for revolution is nothing but a desire to be God, the savior of human beings. His position on stage is significant enough to deliver a theological sense of the meaning. Surrounded by the crowd of Birds, his own creatures, he sits on the Flower Bed, the highest place where he takes a bird's eye-view or air-view of the whole stage from above. He is the literal 'eye in the sky', or all-seeing eye of God.³

³ In *Eye in the Sky* (1957), a science fiction novel written by Philip K. Dick, the title

The Flower Bed reminds *hanamichi* (flower way), a raised passageway to the stage through the audience in the Japanese pre-modern theatrical form of *Kabuki*.⁴ Seemingly supporting its possible relation to this pre-modern paradigm, the space of the King and his Birds takes a metahistorical dimension where there is no separation between the historical and present time from neither the historical past nor the present (Goodman 291). In this world of the living and the dead called the Flower Bed, the King is God who grants himself the supreme divinity (Goodman 295), the King's desire is God's desire, and his dream is God's dream.

However, the King's morning never comes as does in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Morning symbolizes revolution. Every time his request for morning tea is not served, his desire for the coming of morning is faced with the Freudian sense of castration repeatedly. His dream of revolution does not come true as long as he cannot be released from his literal dream. As long as the King cannot be released from the dream, God's dream of human redemption does not come true but remains in the state of dream. The imaginary equation between the King, God and the revolution proves to be just an illusion or the disguised form of the castrated desire or the impossibility in reality. Now the castrated desire of God remains in the King's subconscious and projected to the desire of his creatures Angels within his own dream.

2) Angels' Dream: the Symbolic Stage

The second dream by the Angles is equivalent to the symbolic stage of the Lacanian desire theory. Here, the castrated desire of God is projected to a group of his creatures, the Angels. Unlike the name's implication, the Angels are a motorcycle gang questing for redemption. Except for the 'holy' cause of human redemption, they are the people living in the secular world without God. They belong to the present by occupying the center of the performing area. The Angels are given a task by God to accomplish the redemption. And God's castrated desire for the ideal vision of redemption is projected to the 'Wings' of the Angels.

However, in the course of questing for redemption, the Angles are facing two conflicting tendencies within the group. One section moves toward unrestrained hedonism, the other moves in direction to totalitarian violence (Goodman 289)

refers to the gigantic, all-seeing eye of God. The same image is found in the cover of the British rock band The Alan Parsons Project's 1982 album *Eye in the Sky*.

⁴ *Hanamich* (花道: Flower Way) is essential feature of *Kabuki*. It functions as the entrance and exit for actors. It is also used as an extended performing space for actors. More importantly, *hanamich* plays a role to make spectators participate physically in the performance on stage. This physical participation, within the atmosphere of intimacy between actors and audience members, creates a world of immediate theatre reality over the whole of the auditorium. Consequently, the focal center of performance is made in the midst of the audience (Ernst 104). A fundamental importance is over the mentioned practical needs of *hanamich*. Commonly seen from Japanese and Chinese religious sacrificial rites, a passageway toward the altar is furnished for the entrance and exit of gods. In case of Chinese rites, flowers are often spread on the passage for gods, which might be the origin of the name of 'flower way' (Kim 66-69). After all, *hanamichi* is a symbolic channel connecting the worlds of the gods and the living.

Consequently, their desire for redemption falls short of accomplishment and meets castration again. The wings of the Angels represent the connection to the God's desire or 'phallus' in Freudian terms, but they manage to remain the connection in 'fragmented' shape or portion of the ideal vision of the phallus. If the God's desire for human redemption is impossible to be accomplished by Himself, it is double-time impossible for the Angels to achieve. After all, the Angels' castrated desire for revolution is repressed in their subconscious and will reveal in other disguised form within their dream.

3) Marat-Sade's Dream: the Real Stage

The third dream by the Winds is equivalent to the real stage, the last of the Lacanian three-step development process. On this stage, the Angels' dream of human redemption is projected in their literal dream to the Winds' dream of revolution. Particularly, on this stage, the Angels desire is projected to the real historical figures of French Revolution, Marat and Sade, who are the representative of the group of the Winds. The connection to God that has been fragmented but managed to survive in the forms of the wings of the Angel comes to be broken utterly. The principle of reality dominates 'this' world, which is completely detached from the world of God and ruled by the linear and historical time.

Marat and Sade, the two revolutionists and the Winds occupy the circular stage at the opposite end of the Flower Bed, double time detached from God. In this world of historical dimension, the Winds dream a revolution just as the Angels did in the previous stage. Just as the Angels did, the Winds also fail to meet agreement. While Marat representing the Red Wind follows the direction to Marxism, Sade representing the Grey Wind recoils from the violent line of the Marxist. As a result, their desire for revolution is subject to castration once more in the lack of consensus. The split in the revolutionaries is visually represented in the pie-shaped segments where the Winds occupy as their performing area. The desire to carry away all the pie pieces turns out a mission impossible. A piece of pie is left aside, set on too high up in the sky beyond the reach of human beings. The revolution they seek for becomes 'a pie in the sky.' The Winds' dream for revolution turns out an illusion. As long as they do not release themselves from the dream, their desire is subject to the endless repetition of castration.

Awakening from Dream, Back to the Pre-modern

Summing up the equivalent relation between the dream text of *The Dance of the Angels* and Lacanian desire theory, a diagram is drawn as following:

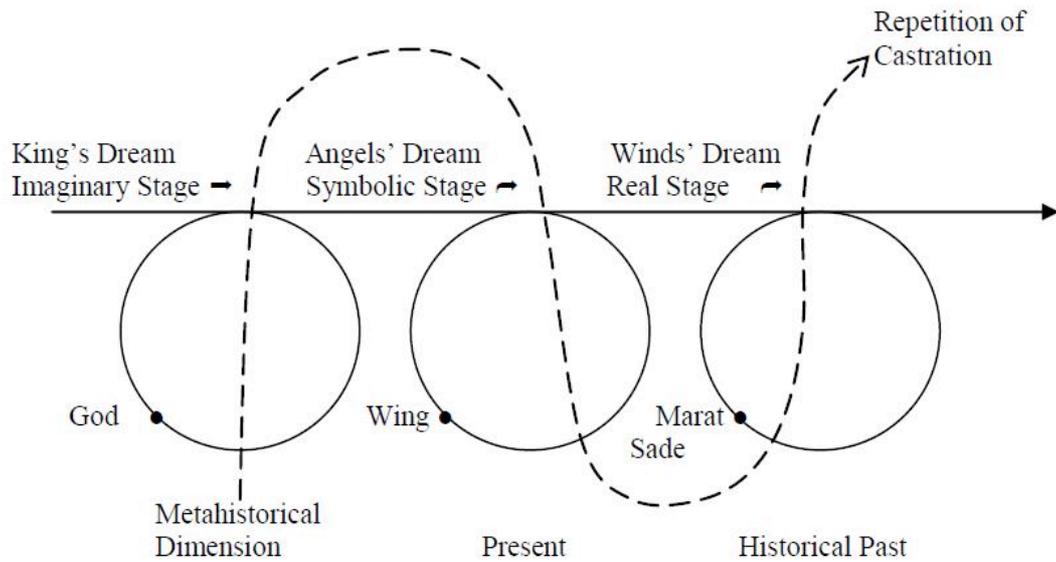


Diagram 1: Dream Text of *The Dance of Angels*

Seen from the Diagram 1, the King of the Birds' imaginary vision of human redemption and the desire to be God is castrated for the first time. On the second stage, the King's desire is projected in his dream to the Angles, and especially, the 'wings' functions as the symbolic signifier of the King's desire for redemption. However, the Angels' desire meets another castration. Their desire is projected again to the Winds' dream of revolution. This time, the King's original desire is projected to the real historical revolutionists Marat and Sade. Their desire for revolution is again subject to castration. As the two arrows in the diagram indicate, the castration of desire for redemption and revolution goes towards the 'permanence without fulfillment.'⁵

The dream text of *The Dance of Angels* delivers the author Satoh Makoto's vision of disillusionment that all the historical human desires to accomplish revolution are nothing but illusion. Right after an oblivious ecstasy, the dreamers are subject to disillusionment of the stark reality. What they think to be 'the' revolution is just 'another' revolution that will end unfulfilled, and what they think to get is not 'the' pie but 'a' piece of pie. Through the disillusionment of such dream text, Satoh suggests a possibility of breaking off the chains of illusion, that is, to awaken from the dream.

As a strategy to the awakening, Satoh keeps his eyes on the dream of the King of the Birds. Located in the metahistorical dimension, the Flower Bed, the King or God's area, has a significant meaning. The linear and historical time and space, that is the modern paradigm, is denied here. Instead, the past and the present fuse and cross each other. The worlds of the living and the dead coexist just as they do in the pre-modern Japanese world. The dream of the King or God is the place where the worlds of the living and the dead are separated first, the historical time-space begins for the first

⁵ The image of permanently repeated castration is implied from the words on screen appearing during the performance: "Dream at the end of dream; Revolution at the end of the revolution / Physical immortality" (Goodman 337).

time, and the first castration of desire starts. Seen from the Diagram 2, Satoh finds a crucial momentum right before the first stage passes into the next stage of the Angles. Here at this point, he carries out a decisive action to cut off the connection to the ceaseless repetition of castrations.

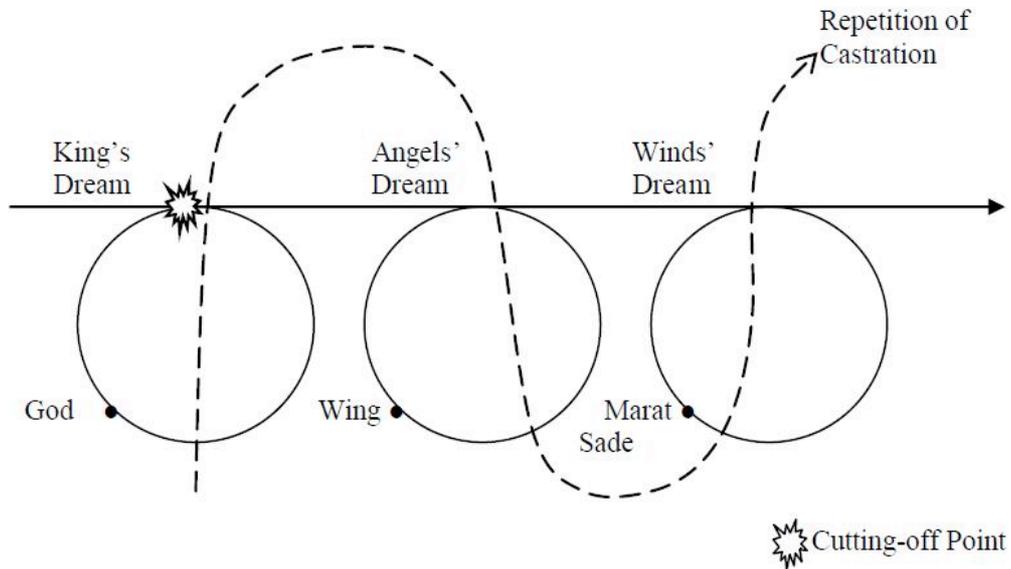


Diagram 2: Satoh's Cut-Off Point in the Dream Text

The cut-off action happens right before the King/God projects his desire to the wings of the Angels. The wings of the Angels are granted by God with an intention to make them descend to the world of the living and accomplish the castrated redemption. Nevertheless, at the very moment when God attaches the wings to the Angels' back, the separation of the worlds of the living and the dead comes into being, and consequently the journey of nightmare begins. To cut off the connection on this point means for Satoh to awaken the King/God from his dream text and turn him back to the situation prior to the nightmare. To this end, Satoh takes a decisive action to detach the wings from the back of the Angels, by burning them. As the whole time of the play implies, to 'burn' the wings of the Angels is the author's symbolic but self-conscious strategy to go back to the pre-modern time-space where the living and the dead are getting together in the vacuum of unnatural dichotomy and separation.

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