

***Transcending the Catastrophes and Horrors of History:  
Atomic Bomb Threat and Activism in Tanaka Chikao's The Head of Mary***

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**Abstract**

The moment of 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing, along with the Holocaust, is imprinted in our memory to be the most terrible disaster mankind has suffered. The moment was promising to end the most destructive war in human history. It also, paradoxically enough, resulted in another disastrous massacre or what anthropologist Mircea Eliade calls “the catastrophes and horrors of history” that “no longer allow any escape.” Thereafter, the matter of overcoming disaster has been emerging as a new challenge for modern humanity. Japanese playwright Tanaka Chikao (1905-1995), for instance, consciously digs in human reaction and attitude in the face of A-bomb disaster, and at the same time suggests ‘religion’ as an alternative way of overcoming. He brings back to the mundane the God’s word and the subsequent possibility of salvation which has been attacked as unscientific and anachronistic, and finally sentenced to death by the western intellectuals with the dawn of the modern era. Especially, *The Head of Mary* (*Mario no Kubi*, 1959) presents these aspects well. Set in the post-war Japan situation, the play deals with the issue of overcoming, or mastery of the A-bomb disaster, in the context of Catholicism. The protagonists in the play portray the human beings helpless before the disaster of the atomic bomb. However, it is worth noting that they do not passively continue their ephemeral existence, assuming wait-and-see attitude. Rather they willingly struggle to do ‘something’ to overcome the given condition. The play gives a clear message of overcoming and activism.

Keywords: Atomic Bombing, Post-war Japan, Religion, Activism, Mastery, Tanaka Chikao, *The Head of Mary*

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## **Introduction**

A religious scholar and writer Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return; Or, Cosmos and History* (1971), maintains as following:

And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning. (Eliade 151)

In the quoted statement, Eliade emphasizes how much ‘the catastrophes and horrors of history’ restrains human freedom, and on the contrary, how foolish and absurd to find the way out of such restraint. Particularly noteworthy in Eliade’s statement is that he takes the collective deportations, massacres, and atomic bombings as examples of ‘the catastrophes and horrors of history’. Not to be overlooked is the ‘last’ position of the atomic bombings among the above three examples. It conforms that the atomic bombing is the most recent major catastrophe. Also it reaffirms that the atomic bombing is at the end of the amplification phase, starting at collective deportations through massacres to atomic bombings, even in the intensity of fear and shock.

As Eliade puts it, the atomic bombing is certainly the most recent and most powerful disaster that human history has experienced. In this sense, Eliade’s statement reminds us of the moment of Hiroshima/Nagasaki atomic bombing that ended the Second World War, the most horrific disaster in human history. Considering that the atomic bombs dropped to end the reckless carnage such as the Holocaust caused another disaster of massive A-bomb victim and incurable trauma both mentally and physically in Japanese people, Eliade’s commentary that “historical pressure no longer allows any escape” meets not only the post-war Japan’s situation but also the present situation in the new millennium where humanity cannot be free from the horrors of global nuclear holocaust. In a different light, Eliade’s statement also points to the limitations of ‘Modernism’s optimistic view about the humanity and future, regarding the overcoming of death in the post-war Japan’s special circumstances.

## **Atomic Bomb and the Post-war Japan**

Modernism began with the emergence of Western scientific thinking and awareness during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The so-called ‘scientific’ thoughts, including Auguste Comte’s positivism (*The Course in Positive Philosophy*, 1830-42), Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution (*On the Origins of Species*, 1859), and Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900), challenged the human belief in the divine world and providence represented by Christianity and creationism. Friedrich Nietzsche even declared that “God is dead” (Gott ist tot) in his book *The Gay Science* (1882), which was the culmination of the doubt and rejection of God, and also a death sentence for the all traditional values (Brustein 8). Modernity and the period, set out with conscious liberation from God, started with the optimism that human problems and sufferings had to be resolved by human themselves rather than divine power, and that the above mentioned task could be accomplished. Realism, the first literary reflection of modernity, was a beneficiary of that optimism promised by modernity to mankind. Henrik Ibsen and other contemporary realist playwrights advocated the idea of ‘scientific art’. They insisted that the artist should

improve the society by, like a surgeon, closely capturing social ills as if seeing through microscope, exposing them to be cured, and finally cutting them precisely with a scalpel. They also believed in this possibility.

It was no exception to Japanese modern literature. For example, Japanese playwrights Kubo Sakae (1900-1958) and Kishida Kunio (1890-1954) were active realists during the Second World War, and they fully embraced modern mentality and expressed it in their dramatic works. Kubo was a socialist realist and sought the possibility of salvation through social transformation and building of ultimate perfect society. He believed that the most obvious way to save the modern age, faced with mental death due to the extinction of divine salvation, was a socialist revolution. On the other hand, Kishida was a psychological realist. He sought the possibility of salvation in human soul and inner self. Kishida believed that the human soul and inner self were the very place of salvation.

However, the above optimism loses strength when the problem facing man is beyond his ability to solve. Hiroshima/Nagasaki atomic bombing was an epoch-making event signaling the counterattack of these unexpected variables. This historical moment proved that humans are weak and incompetent before this catastrophe. This historical moment also predicted a fundamental skepticism about what the modern era promised to mankind, that is, the belief in human capacity and the optimism about social reform. Indeed, after the Second World War the modern era was turning into pessimism about social reform and human salvation. Hiroshima/Nagasaki atomic bombing was announcing the end of war. However, at the same time, it was a sign of the end of optimism and also a signal for the human condition that will be discovered by existentialists and absurdists in the near future.

The genocide and the scars of the atomic bomb left by the war cast a fundamental doubt on the nature, status, and responsibility of man, the paragon of all creation. How can rational human beings do this irrational act? How can a man be responsible and indemnified for such acts and deaths? If it is human reality that cannot be held responsible and cannot be excused, does man exist as the paragon of all creature? What is the existence of unsaved humanity? Since Nietzsche's "Death of God" declaration, humans have lost the prospect of solving their problems and consequently finding salvation by relying on gods or outside forces. A man who has lost the ability and possibility to save himself faces a fundamental existential crisis. Jean-Paul Sartre likened human existence to the 'no-way-out situation' of the survivor abandoned in the sea without a life jacket. Sartre, of course, did not rule out the last hope for the survivor to meet a rescue ship. Albert Camus excluded even the possibility that the rescue ship might pass by, and thus drove the 'no way out situation' to the extreme. Greek king Sisyphus is rolling a huge rock up a hill, knowing that the rock will roll back down. Samuel Beckett's two vagabonds Gogo and Didi are still waiting for Godot who will not come. A man knows that he cannot escape but cannot abandon the hope of escape. This is what Camus calls the 'absurdity' of human condition.

### **Tanaka Chikao's *The Head of Mary***

In light of the post-war Japan situation, the atomic bombing was what Eliade calls "the catastrophe and horror of history" that human beings have borne, and human beings cannot be held responsible for it and therefore are not allowed to escape from

the pressure of history. In this situation, the post-war Japanese literature was faced with serious questions. Does the human genocide and millions of deaths have to be portrayed as an indispensable and indisputable reality that cannot be overcome? Is the possibility of human salvation or divine providence truly impossible in reality? Is it only a task left to literature to describe countless carcasses? The post-war Japanese literature responded to this, and made efforts to overcome the existential condition of human in the post-war period by recalling old things like 'religion' and 'providence and salvation of God' which were expelled along with the beginning of modernity.

Tanaka Chikao (1905-1995) is one of the representative writers who stared at the fear of the atomic bomb and the issue of overcoming it. Tanaka was born in the culturally diverse city of Nagasaki with a long cosmopolitan tradition. Historically the Portuguese missionaries had come here, and the Dutch and Chinese maintained an influence in this city. Additionally, Nagasaki had a long tradition of the Christian faith, particularly Catholicism. During the Tokugawa period the Catholic faith was prohibited. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the religion was allowed, and relatively many people adhered to Catholic faith in Nagasaki. The presence of Christians and the religious rituals in Nagasaki gave a peculiar flavor to the psychology of the region (Konaka 423; Rimer 276). Young Tanaka was familiar with the cosmopolitan environment, and it was natural that he was interested in Western ideas. And understandably enough, he took up the study of French literature at Keio University in Tokyo.

As a student, Tanaka joined many small theatre companies and attempted acting. Also he joined *shingeki* (literally, new theatre) theatre companies in hopes of better understanding Westernized theatre. Tanaka began his playwriting career by joining in publishing the literary magazine *Playwriting*. He also participated in the launching Bungaku-za, in 1931, one of the leading *shingeki* (literally, new drama) theatre companies in Japan.<sup>1</sup> While he was building up his career as a playwright, the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki on August 8, 1945. The complete devastation of the city turned out to be a turning point for Tanaka to be born again as a playwright. With the fall of Nagasaki and its spiritual and religious traditions, including Catholic faith, he felt "the uselessness of everything his father's generation had stood for" and attempted to search out some "transcendental meaning beyond the emptiness" (Rimer 278). Accordingly, Tanaka explores essential human conflicts in the post-Nagasaki disaster situation through the eyes of a Christian, and embraces 'religion' as an alternative to the limit of human salvation faced by the modern era. The writer recalls again in this world the possibility of God's world and consequent divine providence and human salvation, which was devalued by modern thoughts as an unscientific and obsolete tradition and eventually sentenced to death. Tanaka's play *The Head of Mary* (*Maria no Kuni*, 1959) exemplifies this well.

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<sup>1</sup> Shingeki was the leading form of modern theatre in Japan in the 20th century. It was the effort to introduce Western-style realist theatre to Japan, first by presenting the works of Western writers such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and Eugene O'Neill, but then by producing Japanese works. Performances reflected the styles of Russian proscenium theatre, and some of the elements included realistic foreign costumes, the use of actresses over traditional *onnagata*, male actors who played women's roles in Kabuki theatre. (Wikipedia.com 'Shingeki')

This play is set in the aftermath of the atomic bomb attack on Nagasaki, particularly on the Urakami Catholic Church. The play is about survivors of the atomic bombing, and the author Tanaka, a Catholic himself, pivots upon the religious motif and traditions of the Roman Catholic faith (Treat 1995: 309). In the play, a group of survivors plot to steal a statue of Virgin Mary so that they may rightfully restore their faith. Among them, Shika makes her living by prostitution on the second floor of a local market in Nagasaki. A big and red scar on the left side of her face is the trace of exposure to radioactivity at the time of atomic bombing. On the lower floor, Shinobu sells medicines and poetry, and receives guests. Shika and Shinobu work as nurses at the hospital by day. Yabari, an inpatient, wants to bring Shika of a scarred face to the United States to inform the world of the reality of atomic bomb damage. He argues for political activism in an effort to ban atomic bombs. But Shika craves for absolute justice and believes that only God can provide that (Goodman 599), by retorting "Absolute justice cannot be found in politics. Nor in existence. Nor absolute freedom either" (Tanaka 145).

Shika and Shinobu do a special thing every night. They gather the pieces of the stone statue of Mary at the Urakami Church destroyed by the atomic bomb, bring them to the prostitute's room, and assemble them. Their efforts to complete the icon have a metaphoric meaning of rebuilding their religious faith after the destruction and also the difficulties of rebuilding the faith. The sculpture is ahead of completion, with leaving only the head of Mary. On a snowy night, Shika arrives at the Church. The head of Mary is covered with snow, and has a scar on her face like Shika. Shika grabs the rosary and asks Mary for forgiveness. Shinobu also arrives at the Church. In the last scene of the play, the two women struggle to move the head of Mary, the last remaining piece to complete the icon, but the head does not budge. At that moment, the head of Mary miraculously and surrealistically speaks to them:

I'll let you suckle at my breast, I'll let you drink to your hearts' content. My milk is so sweet, oh so sweet! First drink, then I'll listen to your prayers. So come, come! (Tanaka 180).

Shika and Shinobu's action to cherish the statue conveys their religious devotion. And Virgin Mary, by giving away the last thing she has, becomes a sacrifice herself (Konaka 423). The voice and words of Mary's head suggests the possibility of hope and salvation. Although Shika and Shinobu are unsuccessful in moving the head and completing the icon, their efforts to reconstruct their faith are rewarded (Goodman 599).

## **Conclusion**

The two women, Shika and Shinobu, in the play portray the human beings helpless in the face of the irresistible disaster of the atomic bombing. Failing to lift Mary's head symbolizes the difficulty or impossibility of overcoming in reality. On the other side, this act suggests another important point. They struggle to do 'something' to overcome the given condition, rather than just extend their lives for another day, assuming wait-and-see attitude. At the moment of action, they have an existential meaning, and at the very moment they are practicing their will to overcome. While we cannot promise when the overcome will be achieved, the mysterious voice and message of Mary implies that their struggle for human salvation is not meaningless.

Like this, the play ends with such “complex symbol” of the last but unforgettably imprinted action of the two women (Wetmore 109). In this way, *The Head of Mary*, set in the post-World War Japans situation, deals with the issue of ‘overcoming’ or mastery of the A-bomb disaster, especially in the religious context of Catholicism and Christianity. The strategy of recalling the past paradigm of religion and god to the present expresses the author’s conscious will to overcome or master the human condition after the atomic bombing, which gives a clear message of activism.

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