

Global Cultural Identity on the Example of Japanese Trivial Literature and European Literary Tendencies

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0488

The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The modern global information society of today depends on numerous national infrastructures which have developed as intellectual capital, differing historical, sociological and political conditions, as well as a system of organization and presentation of information. The relationship between the pure and the trivial literature depends upon historical and personal particularities and relations. Thus we encounter the trivial genre and its flourishing in the highly developed pre-modern urban culture of the Edo period in Japan, with its second peak marking the mid-twentieth century. The main challenge of the 21st century is a pursuit of an answer to the question whether the appeal of the trivial literature represents response to the reading crisis. Does the modern culture reaches for irrationalism, mysticism, idealism and the fantastic in order to evade the dry reality over-saturated by facts, information and exact data? By searching for the meaning, we are approaching third peak of trivial literature in Europe, as well as in Japan. These tendencies will be elaborated throughout this paper in order to recognize bonds between trivial literature tendencies and global cultural identity.

Key words: trivial literature, cultural identity, Edo period, Japan, Europe.

INTRODUCTION:

After the Second World War, a novel has become a popular literary genre in Japanese literature, which primarily related to a special genre of trivial literature the "trivial novel". This literary form was an important cultural factor that considerably influenced the masses, since the works of trivial literature were read not only in the hours of leisure, but as well as on the way home from the work place. This popular genre owes its development to the "novel of a working man"(sarariman shosetsu), which recorded an unprecedented success in Japan, but also to the influence of European literary tradition. We will consider the place and role of "trivial novel" in Japanese and European literary tradition throughout this paper.

European literary tradition, the emergence of the novel and its relation to the cultural identity of the nation

In order to understand the uniqueness of the novel in Japanese literature, we must address the great influence of European literary tradition on this literary genre and give an historical overview of literary genres in general. Henryk Markiewicz, a famous Polish writer, emphasized the fact that in cultural circles long-accepted division into the three literary genres: epics, lyrics and drama still prevail. This division, which is in the conceptual and terminological terms identical to the ancient tradition, refers primarily to the artistic literature. Goethe wrote that there are only three natural forms of poetry: form that clearly narrates (epopee), form that passionately expresses excitement (lyrics), and form that represents personal impact - a plot (drama), while claiming that those three means of poetic expression can act together or separately.

Although there have been attempts throughout French and English theory of literature to classify a novel and novella in the epics, as a particular literary genre considered to be a part of poetry, that wasn't entirely possible, since the poetry and prose were strictly opposed to each other. The novel, as a literary genre, was created under the influence of medieval and early modern romance and it was inspired, at the same time, by the tradition of the novella. The novella is a short and closed prosaic form which, due to its shortness, has the stronger and more compact structure than a novel. The term novella originates from the Italian word "novella", which means "new", as it refers to a new narration of some event, and dates back to the Renaissance. Unlike the novel whose structure is somewhat more complicated, a novella mostly contains only one event, one or two characters and a limited plot. The term novel (roman in Serbian language) originates from medieval literature, referring to all writings and works written in domestic, folk languages - Romanic (linguae romanae), different from works written in Latin language (linguae latinae). Later this term obtained its present meaning and was gradually accepted in other national European literatures, first in French (le roman) and than in Italian (il romanzo) literature. Nowadays it can be defined as "an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting."¹

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/421071/novel>, accessed on 22/04/2013.

Compared with the novella, a novel is freer, open prosaic form which aspires for comprehensiveness and vastness, while picturing certain reality and its duplicity.

Global cultural identity is reflected in the novel, as a literary form that represents reality, superior in relation to empirical or historical reality of our everyday experience. Literary formed reality shows a cognitive construction reach in meaning, since a novel has almost inexhaustible arsenal of presentation, manner of narration or compositional forms. The development of social and economic relations in 20th century brought new cultural values, resulting in the emergence of two types of cultures: mass and elitist. Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset claimed that society is a dynamic unity composed of two factors: minorities and masses.² Whilst the elitist culture is an artistic product who has no, or little, commercial purpose, mass culture is a commodity entirely produced for the market, which earns profit through its sale to mass consumers. Historians that were mainly interested in the culture at the global level, differ in their views concerning the time as to when the elements of mass culture emerged. According to T. Adorno, the prototype of modern mass culture was primarily created in England with the rise of capitalism (i.e. between 17th and 18th century). In his opinion, the novels from that period, like those of Defoe and Richardson, had a distinct commercial component. On the artistic plan, mass culture performed special social functions, by introducing a man into the world of illusions and unfulfilled dreams. Therefore, literature that belongs to mass culture is characterised by light genres: detective and Western fiction, melodramas, musicals and comics. However, despite being seemingly insubstantial, mass culture has a serious basis in the method of its functioning and not in its quality.³ Considering that the "trivial novel" is available to the masses, it affects the cultural identity of a nation, while representing at the same time a specific product of the mentioned culture.

Japanese literary tradition as a basis for the development of the "trivial novel"

With the appearance of Japan's first novel, which is considered to be one of the first novels in world's prose in general, *Genji Monogatari*, written around year 1000, the features of the novel genesis of the Japanese literary tradition were conceived. The publication of this work of fiction is a result of a long debate that took place amongst connoisseurs of Japanese literature, focusing primarily on literary criticism of the novel as a literary genre. The poetry was the only literary genre that was considered to be "real literature" and it certainly had primacy over prose, and especially over the novel. Until the publication of the novel *Genji Monogatari* prose was suppressed in Japan due to the neo-Confucian cultural framework and the Buddhist view of the world, the socio-political situation in Japan, as well as the prevailing use of classical Chinese language and script, which was regarded as the only language suitable for writing literary works of art. The classical Chinese language has long been a means of expression of Japanese literature, until the moment when the phonetization of ideographic alphabet was used in the first Japanese novel. This is considered to be a big civilization leap, realized in Japan in 9th century, since it liberated creative genius of Japanese writers from the shackles which imposed restrictions of ideographic alphabet and classical Chinese language and for the first time enabled them to create their works in an unadulterated Japanese language. The appearance of the novel *Genji*

² Jose Ortega y Gasset, "Las deshumanización del Arte e Ideas sobre la novela" (1925), Princeton University Press, 1972, Russian translation, Moscow, 1991.

³ Kurt Lang, Gladys Engel Lang, "Mass Society, Mass Culture, and Mass Communication: The Meanings of Mass", *International Journal of Communication*, 3 (2009).

monogatari is the best proof of the importance of the consequences of this language incentive in the development of Japanese literary tradition. These characteristics of the Japanese literary tradition fall within the *Heian Period*, which was considered to be one of the three mutually connected periods in Japanese literary tradition which marked the turning point in the developmental path of the Japanese novel. “Although written Chinese (Kanbun) remained the official language of the Heian period imperial court, the introduction and wide use of kana saw a boom in Japanese literature. Despite the establishment of several new literary genres such as the novel and narrative monogatari (物語) and essays, literacy was only common among the court and Buddhist clergy.”⁴

After 1600 (Tokugawa Phase), which was marked by a struggle for a national unification and national affirmation of Japan, simultaneously with the affirmation of Japanese language as expressional means of Japanese literature, the second period of the novel development has occurred. This period is considered to be the second golden age of the flourishing of Japanese culture, when it became possible freer development of all literary forms and genres.

Starting from 1868 the new period began, the age of modernization of Japan, during which the novel has been developing in Japan under the dominant influence of western European literary tradition. However, in the novel development, as well as in other domains, contrary to overall modernization, self-serving originality has been preserved in Japan. The extent of real influence of western European literary tradition on Japanese could be seen in the form of the comparative method in relation to the novel dealing with real life, everyday living, social and economic problems of a working man - employed in large companies. It is necessary to accentuate that the novel of a working man (sarariman shosetsu), bearing in mind the tradition of Japanese society, and particularly high sense of duty and working commitments, is characterized by specific originality, in respect to contents, as well as in the manner of concept of the plot, which greatly differs from contingent western European models. It could rather be said that novels of the novella genre about working man do not exist in such a form and with such tendency in the western European modern literature.

Japan's cultural identity in the works of Genji Keita

Genji Keita, writer of ten significant novels and around two hundred novellas, stories and tales, is the founder of the typical Japanese literary genre “*Novel of a Working Man*” (sarariman shosetsu). He himself was an employee of a large company, i.e. sarariman, for over 26 years; hence he contributed to the originality of this literary genre with his personal example. One of his most important novels, depicting the cultural identity of Japanese working man, is certainly *Santō Jūyaku* (Assistant Director of the Third Rank). This novel was available to the masses through periodic publication in Sande – mainichi newspaper. Genji’s carefully selected images from real life and working life of Japanese sarariman made him very popular with the reading public. He brought a certain amount of humor and fantasy while faithfully painting working Japanese men. Genji artistically transposed details from everyday life of Japanese clerks, while delicately suggesting the aspirations that sarariman secretly nourished in his chronically tired soul. According to literary critic Togaeri

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heian_period#cite_note-1, accessed on 25/04/2013.

Hajimu, the fundamental success of Genji's novels could be explained in the need of masses of Japanese working people to see themselves in a particular social mirror and to observe how heroes similar to them by means of education, character, behavior, work commitments, as well as in private life will manage to cope with various adventures.

Genji's novels truly reflect cultural identity of a sarariman, by describing not only the Japanese working man, but also his friends and bosses, as well as the details of codes of life in the post-war Japanese society. His novels fulfilled spiritual need of Japanese people, as well as the social function. Namely, in post-war Japan significant migration of work force from villages to cities occurred, as the industrial growth rate of 10% per year demanded very fast inflow of workers from agriculture and their even faster adaptation on working conditions. By depicting difficult situations in which the working man is often found within a Japanese company in a humorous and sometimes optimistic way, Genji Keita aimed at soothing a soul of confused and literally lost sarariman, and therefore fulfilling very important spiritual need of Japanese reading public. On the other hand, his novels offered set of instructions for working people that have for the first time found themselves in such very confusing social context. In this regard the novel *Sarariman shosetsu* was very instructive, by suggesting to working man how he should behave, how to comprehend and endure different pressures at the work place, as well as what kind of relationship should he build with colleagues and bosses. The clarification of some of the basic phenomena of Japanese society of the period, such as: arranged marriages, covering bosses' infidelities, need to blindly obey codes of conduct within a company, acceptance of all sorts of ordinances strictly, fulfillment of all rules of the company regardless of its logic and usefulness, denial of one's own personality and identity, aimed to help sarariman to comprehend how he should act in similar situations and to ease the pressure that he constantly felt in the workplace.

In accordance with the Japanese tradition and modeled upon the work of Miyamoto Musashi the *Paths of Samurai*, which was written in medieval ages as a set of instructions for samurais, Genji Keita in his *Reader for Sarariman (Sarariman Tokuhon)* gives ideas as to how the path of sararimans should look like. Throughout the context of this novel's plot every sarariman was able to find concretely and explicitly expressed instructions about the manner in which he should present himself in a particular situation, as to what is appropriate for one sarariman, how he should nourish his relations within and outside the company, etc. In his later work *Office for those Who don't Receive their Salary any more* (Mukyū Shoku taku shitsu), Genji presented, in the humorous way, seemingly absurd situation: although sarariman's life is full of misery and sorrow and represents extended torture considering that he cannot even choose who will he marry, nor what he is going to wear, at the end of his working days sarariman nevertheless thinks that this is the best of all the worlds and he is not really capable to accept the notion that he will continue his life in any other milieu. As this *office* enables retired workers to continue to go to work every day, even after the retirement, this novel is a testimony of the greatest tragedy of sarariman's life. In this way the writer has evoked the atmosphere of Japanese company that killed everything that was alive in sarariman, to the extent that he cannot survive outside its sterile conditions. Work of this remarkable writer was largely responsible for the better understanding of the cultural identity of this great nation on the global level.

Intercultural links between Japanese and European literary traditions

Japanese literary tradition has experienced a real Renaissance, and particularly the novel has prospered as a literary genre, in the 20th century. The „Novel of a Working Man" is a typical Japanese creation, regardless that such literary forms have been appearing simultaneously in western European literary tradition as well. Even besides the influence of western European literary tradition on this genre of a novel in Japan, it can certainly be asserted that a „Novel of a Working Man" is nevertheless distinctive, from social as well as from genre point of view, and that it protects certain originality of modern Japanese prose.

One of the factors that contributed to a sense of insecurity that had always troubled Japanese writers is the cultural influence of the West, as they passed through the ordeal that their Western ideals have never had to experience. They had to go through a double education- primarily to be brought up in their own cultural tradition, and later to adopt cultural traditions that were heretofore entirely unknown to them. Thanks to a good knowledge of European languages and literature, leading Japanese writers of the modern era are much more aware of Western values, even of those that are contradictory, than their own people. Due to their sharp observation, these writers have felt very early pitfalls that arise in the process of westernization of modern Japan. They are deeply aware that their own tradition and the tradition of the West cannot always be consistent and that the Westernization of Japan does not necessarily mean its modernization, and vice versa. Sometimes they comprehend difficulties that exist in their efforts to understand the culture of the West. Worse yet, they cannot help but notice that, by studying Western culture, that they are experiencing a split of their own personal and cultural identity and, therefore, becoming afraid of losing "authenticity" in Japanese society.

The phenomena of alienation of writers and their identity crisis in the encounter with Western culture directly influenced the artistic expression of modern Japanese literature. As forerunners of modern literature, Tsubouchi Shōyō and Futabatei Shimei, tried to reinvent and remodel the Japanese novel, by using the modern European literature of their time as a model, but the works they created were necessarily limited to the literary inheritance from the period prior to the contemporary.

CONCLUSION:

Reading is an important segment of human and social development. This is not passive activity, since it requires investment of reader's understanding and knowledge as well as profound commitment of his mind and time. In the future, world literature will be dominated by mass culture. The value of trivial literature is reflected in the fact that it is a vivid representation of cultural identity of nations in its raw artistic form. The question could be raised: Is trivial literature an answer to reading crisis? Are irrationalism, mysticism, fantasy and idealism necessary in order to avoid mere factography of everyday life, to concurrently satisfy minimized esthetic needs and honor deficiency of time? The questions of meaning or futility of human existence demand, to be truthful, also a rational cogitation, but is in dire need for emotional and esthetic answer as well, at least in the form of trivial literature.

Japanese cultural identity can be found in the works of trivial literature, which, under a strong influence of European literary tradition, gained an important place in the

literature of the country of the rising sun. Although this type of literature is not recognized as a veritable artistic contribution, clearly defined profiles of novel heroes, in which one could recognize archetypes, events and taboos which round up Japanese people's life, impeccability of personal and family life, first rate education, behavior, career and principles of Confucianism, all contribute to a creation of a global picture of this magnificent culture.

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