

*Serving Justice at Multiple Levels: Emotional Satisfactions Created in  
Yumemakura Baku's Abe no Seimei Stories*

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**Abstract**

Justice is considered universally a core value of the human world, although different cultures and times have their own specific approaches to justice and principles of measuring whether justice has been achieved. In different contexts, the scope and ponderings concerning justice are also very different. In response to the LibrAsia 2016 call to look into justice issues from various perspectives, this paper is examining selected works of Japanese writer Yumemakura Baku's *Onmyoji* series of stories, to review how this 25-year-old series has been describing, discussing, and critiquing issues of justice through fictional narratives of the famous Heian onmyoji Abe no Seimei (921-1005). With his power to transcend the objective world and reach out to the world of spirits and into the world of the human psyche, Abe no Seimei is represented as being in the pivot of worlds, mediating among them. I would like to argue that his mediation, whether successful or not in coming to a satisfactory resolution of the problems, is in fact a process of justice. Characters in the story seek Abe no Seimei's help because they would like to see justice restored, and readers following the stories enjoy the process of justice being restored through their psychological and emotional participation in the reading process. In other words, this paper ascribes the long-term success of the stories to its function of discussing justice at both the textual and the extra-textual levels.

Keywords: justice, truth, mystery fiction, emotional satisfaction, fairness

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## Introduction

Justice is such a complex concept and is present in so many different aspects of our lives that it is almost impossible to talk about it in a short paper. One can discuss justice in a philosophical dialogue, one can discuss justice in a social context, or one can talk about whether justice has been maintained in a legal case; and in each of these contexts the definition of justice will have a different focus. In this paper, the discussion will be limited to a specific literary text, the work of a contemporary Japanese writer, Yumemakura Baku. The aim is to examine how issues of justice are not only present in the content, development, and structure of the stories, but also possibly in the readers' interactive experience with the texts. I am arguing that the satisfaction of reading these stories comes very much from the sense that "justice" (in the simplest common sense understanding of fairness) has been respected and restored.

Here, no attempt to give a precise definition of justice will be made. The discussion will make use of the most layman and general understanding of the concept of justice. In the following discussion of stories and the reading experience when "justice" is used, it is referring to a sense of fairness, a sense that balance has been maintained, and even something as crude as "the matter has been properly and correctly handled" so that most people feel that is right. In doing so, this paper will not contribute to a definitive explanation of what justice is, but by referring to a generally agreed sense of fairness, it is hoped that the paper can help to confirm that there is indeed a commonly agreed understanding of what justice is, and that common understanding is present in the core of our responses to daily life practices, as seen through the analysis of selected literary narratives.

The stories to be examined are taken from Yumemakura Baku's (1951-) collections *Onmyoji* (1988-). The series features some historical characters from the Heian period (794-1192), with the court onmyoji (or, yin-yang master) Abe no Seimei (921-1005) and courtier Minamoto no Hiromasa (918-980) as the main characters. Abe no Seimei was a famed court onmyoji and there were quite a lot of legends about his power of divination. The Seimei Shrine in Kyoto was dedicated to him by the emperor, and today it has become a very popular tourist spot. In the fiction series, Seimei and Hiromasa are good friends and they are always together in their adventures, and many readers look upon the pair as a Sherlock-Watson kind of partnership, only that the setting has been changed to Heian Japan. In these stories, people from different backgrounds come to Seimei for help when they encounter problems, inexplicable events that they cannot find a logical explanation for, and many times these have to do with the unseen world, the spiritual world beyond the physical reality, or the psychological world within ourselves.

Although many readers enjoy the historical setting, as well as the cultural references carefully made in the stories, the detective fiction framework is perhaps one of the most easily identifiable reasons for its attraction and popularity among readers of different age groups and cultures. Indeed, most of the stories in the series can be categorized as mystery fiction. (I am aware that in the study of detective fiction, there is a careful differentiation between different subgenres such as the mystery fiction, crime fiction, detective stories, and the "mean street" hardboiled detective stories, etc. Here in this paper the term mystery fiction will be used for the simple reason that in the heart of the narratives, there is always a mystery to be solved, and in most of the

cases a solution, if not a resolution, is presented at the end of the story.) Thus, many of the discussions about mystery fiction can well be applied to the understanding of Baku's series.

For example, why are people interested in reading mystery fiction/detective fiction? In *Murder, Manners, Mystery: Reflections on Faith in Contemporary Detective Fiction*, Erb (2007) referred to a general argument:

The second set of less adventurous individuals, the argument goes, cannot confront a world without meaning, and read murder mysteries since they provide a solution to a problem and, by analogy, offer certitude that there are foundational principles in life and reason for living. Crime fiction, so considered, is an opiate for increasingly insecure middle-class minds, struggling to be assured of a permanent moral order. (p. 42)

Murder does not always appear in Baku's fictional Heian world, but every story contains a problem, and the yin-yang master always provides a solution to the problem, and reassures both the characters inside the story and the contemporary readers outside the story that everything can be explained clearly, and in most of the cases, handled properly.

PD James, famous writer of detective fiction, was also quoted by Erb (2007) on why she thought the mystery genre was attractive:

Because they do affirm the intelligibility of the universe; the moral norm; the sanctity of life. And because, at the end, there is a solution. I think I'm very frightened of violence. I hate it. I'm very worried by the fact that the world is a much more violent place than when I was a girl. And it may be that by writing mysteries that I am able, as it were, to exorcise this fear, which may very well be the reason why so many people enjoy reading a mystery. It seems to me that the more we live in a society in which we feel our problems – problems of war and peace, racial problems, problems of drugs, problems of violence – to be literally beyond our ability to solve, it seems to me very reassuring to read a popular form of fiction which itself has a problem at the heart of it. One which the reader knows will be solved by the end of the book; and not by supernatural means or good luck, but by human intelligence, human courage and human perseverance. That seems to me one of the reasons why the crime novel, in all its forms and varieties, does hold its place in the affections of its readers. (p. 131)

According to James, at the end of the mystery fiction, readers expect a solution, which serves to reassure all that our world is intelligible, and that something can be done (and is usually done) to restore the world to a balance when the mystery is solved. In other words, there are the two major principles of the Truth and Justice at the basis of the mystery fiction, and the satisfaction of reading the texts could very well be the satisfaction of seeing these two principles honoured by the mystery fiction to different extents. In *Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective and Crime Fiction* (2001), Malmgren mentioned Conan Doyle's story "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" as a special one because in this case the principles of Truth and Justice are in conflict with one another. "The inspector wants the Truth, and he believes Holmes can help him discover it. Holmes knows, however, that the revelation of Truth will

result in a miscarriage of Justice, and for him the latter principle takes precedence. And so he deliberately suppresses the Truth” (p. 52). This was fully supported by Watson and therefore the record of the case (as noted in the story) was only released many years later when it would no longer affect the parties involved. This is an instant for Malmgren to claim that “[a]mong gentlemen in the Victorian era, Doyle makes clear, when the two principles are in the balance, justice weighs more heavily than the whole truth” (p. 52) .

Our world, however, is very different from the world depicted in the golden age of the mystery fiction, so much so that contemporary mystery fiction also reveals a change in the way the principles of Truth and Justice are honoured. Malmgren remarked in his study that “the truth generally overmasters, it is the subgenre’s dominant sign. But justice is more problematic, especially in contemporary mystery fiction” (p. 52). To put it simply, he said:

[I]n the world of Holmes and Watson, the truth is suppressed so that justice might prevail; in the modern world, when justice fails, as it frequently does, we must be satisfied with the truth. In modern mystery fiction, crimes occur, are detected, and are usually solved, but justice becomes much more problematic, sometimes hard to define, other times harder to uphold. Solution does not automatically lead to resolution, and justice becomes an unstable sign, as evil is named but not defeated, identified but not counteracted. (p. 57)

And thus, according to Malmgren, the age of a different kind of mystery fiction arrived, with writers trying to reflect the practices and situations of the contemporary world but still respecting the classic British (manners and manors) mystery fiction tradition, which “assumes that the world finally makes sense, that there is a logic to human behaviour and an order to human affairs” (Malmgren, 2001, p.59).

What is left in this new type of mystery fiction (or what the writer called detective fiction), is the truth. “The main consolation, then, in these novels built on instances of rank injustice, is that, later or sooner, the truth comes out” (Malmgren, 2001, p. 66). He continued to talk about this modern need for intelligibility:

In the modern world, then, the signs of the crime must finally be intelligible – the Truth *must* come out – since full disclosure is the only guarantee of meaningfulness. Unfortunately, the verdict those signs render is often, from the perspective of a Victorian gentleman, a miscarriage of justice, a travesty. And if such travesties of justice can and do occur, then we have moved (as is suggested by the reference to Macdonald above) away from Poirot’s ordered and centered world toward the decentered streets of detective fiction. (p. 66)

The satisfaction of reading the modern mystery fiction then, is only that of knowing the Truth, of the ability to make sense of the signs of crime, and hopefully in turn, our world. What about justice? How does that not follow from a discovery of the truth of the crime?

Erb in *Murder, Manners, Mystery: Reflections on Faith in Contemporary Detective Fiction* (2007), when examining the issue of justice in modern crime fiction, pondered:

But how is the punishment to fit the crime? Standing as it does in the future, can justice be anything other than retribution, death without hope? What satisfaction can be made for the loss of a human life? A loss is known only when it is known, acknowledged, remembered, and if the one who caused the loss is to be redeemed, that person's memory must be redeemed. How can a murderer ever fully remember killing as a loss? How can a murderer fully confess a crime and experience thanksgiving in final release from the consequences? (p. 8)

These are interesting and important questions to ask. In Baku's mystery fiction, lives are sacrificed, not usually from murder, but sometimes indirectly due to human fault, and there are other losses too. So the question of retribution and repayment is also relevant. How this is dealt with in the stories featuring the yin-yang master who moves across the physical human world, the world of the spirits, and who can read the invisible emotional and psychological world? The following is a brief discussion of four stories in the latest collection to see how a sense of justice is negotiated.

### **Story One: "Ghost Market" [Gui Shi]**

As usual, a nobleman came to visit Seimei because he encountered something horrifying and inexplicable, not of this world. The night before, on his way to visit his mistress, he passed by a temple in his ox-cart, when he smelt the nice smell of cooking. Curious to see what it was, he got off and went into the temple with his servant, to discover a kind of night-market going on. Although very similar to a marketplace operating in daytime, this one was unusual in a number of ways. First, all the "people" inside were fuzzy, without a clear outline and were barely distinguishable as adults, children, or male/female. Second, instead of walking, these fuzzy creatures moved with their belly on the floor, like snakes. Third, contrary to daytime marketplace, this gathering was very quiet. Despite these strange features, the nobleman was still captivated to stay and actually ate a bowl of noodles, before he met the ghost of a manservant whom he had accused of theft and beaten and expelled from his household. It was said that two weeks after the servant was kicked out, his dead body was found in the neighbourhood. Now the nobleman saw the inlaid comb which he thought was stolen by the very same manservant and he pocketed it before he rushed out of the temple with his servant in great terror. Although he managed to reclaim the lost item of jewellery, he was followed by the dead manservant as well as the noodle seller at the night market, and his fear drove him to Seimei's for help. Finally, Seimei asked if the nobleman was willing to pay for what he had taken in the night-market, not only the noodles but also the inlaid comb, and after the nobleman's grudging agreement, Seimei created some underworld money and burnt it to the ghosts, who graciously accepted and left.

In the story, the ghosts, while following the nobleman home, even to outside Seimei's house, kept repeating "please pay" (Baku, 2014, p. 26). When the nobleman anxiously asked Seimei when the ghosts will leave him alone, Seimei answered matter-of-factly "when your destiny with them is finished" (Baku, 2014, p. 27). When the nobleman protested that the inlaid comb belonged to him in the first place, Seimei explained that in the spirits' world, the logic of ownership did not work in the same way, since the nobleman had indeed taken the comb at the night-market, he had to pay. This looks like a very simple matter of justice demanding attention and restoration, according to the logic of the ghosts' world. But perhaps it is more than

that. The encounter between the nobleman and the (by now dead) manservant started not at the night-market, their connection started when the manservant was still alive, when he was beaten up and expelled from the household because the nobleman believed he had stolen the comb. From what the ghost said, it did seem that the servant had stolen it and had wanted to give it to his own mistress, so the nobleman's accusation was justified. But the result of the accusation was a good beating and expulsion from the household which might be the direct or indirect cause of the servant's death. If looked at this way, then the "punishment" or the "price" this servant had to pay for the object of the comb was his life, and thus perhaps his claim of ownership of the object was justified at the night-market. The nobleman had to pay when he took the comb at the night-market, for the ghost had already paid for it with his life.

It is a very crude kind of "common sense" justice. What is taken should be returned, and hopefully the taken and the return can be of similar or equivalent value. And only when that transaction is completed can one feel satisfied and the closure of the story a meaningful one. The title of the story is Ghost "Market", where objects (and services, but usually objects) are exchanged for an equivalent amount of money. Thus the "transaction" element is clearly a focus. The market in this story is a ghost market, the nature of trading/bartering is still there, only that the currency is different, and in this case fairness is maintained by payment other than money, it is acknowledgement, respect, sense of remorse, a formal apology, and moreover, an acceptance to be known and judged. The dead manservant is redeemed because his death is acknowledged and remembered.

The successful completion of this "transaction" left the major characters concerned satisfactorily enjoying a drink in the company of moonlight and blooming cherry blossoms. The concluding image of the story is this: "The petals are Buddha. Buddha is heaven and earth. Countless Buddhas are flying and dancing in the emptiness of blue sky. Hiromasa closed his eyes and continued to play his flute" (Baku, 2014, p. 37). This follows an earlier discussion between Seimei and Hiromasa about Buddha being present in all objects, and the life and death/creation and destruction cycle followed by all objects is only a confirmation of the universality of Buddha. Here using this as the concluding image seems to be the author's way of saying that what happened to the nobleman was only another instance of the Buddha's way. Seimei's intervention was just to ensure that natural justice is carried out smoothly and with the least trouble caused to parties concerned. The peaceful celebratory mood at the end of the story suggests that this result is satisfactory to everyone concerned, including the readers.

### **Story Two: "The Strange Story of the Celestial Peach" [Xian Tao Qi Tan]**

This story did not feature Seimei nor his friend Hiromasa, but a fellow yin-yang master, Doumon, a free spirit not employed by the court. One night he was having a stroll and was attracted by the fragrance of wine coming from a nearby house. Never one to resist a good drink, he approached the big wine urn outside a shabby house. As he was drinking, a man shot an arrow at him, and although missed him, was too afraid to continue. Upon inquiry, the man revealed that he was guarding his house and his six-year old son inside against the visit of a celestial tiger. This man had stolen a peach from the trunk of a Sakura tree a few months ago, when he was out hunting for

food to nurse his son who had been ill. With the delicious-looking peach in the house, the son miraculously recovered. But for the past few nights a very ancient-looking woman had been visiting them and pleading with the father to return a stolen item, or else something dire was going to happen. The archer kept pretending that he had taken nothing because he was afraid that if the peach was given back, his son would regress to his former illness. But tonight was the deadline when the celestial tiger would be released by the heavenly palace to punish the person who took the treasure. Having drunk the wine, Doumon offered to stay with this father and see if he could help, for the archer confessed that he had indeed taken the peach and hidden it. The ancient woman appeared again and again she pleaded for the return of the peach. When Doumon questioned her, she revealed her true identity – she was one of the fairies assigned to guard the seven celestial peaches which got lost in the human world because of the chaos caused by a monkey in the heavenly palace. On the day the Heavenly Mother wanted to celebrate the once every 9000-year fruition of the peaches, the monkey stole into the heavenly garden and ate one. Havoc resulted and seven peaches were lost to the human world. Seven fairies were sent to reclaim them and only this old fairy failed to do so. Finally she tracked the peach down and came to the archer. Hearing the full story, Doumon returned the peach and the ancient fairy immediately resumed her original appearance of a beautiful young fairy. She was so grateful to Doumon that she promised every time when he needed someone to serve him wine, he could summon her from the western sky.

Although this story does not feature the usual pair of friends, Seimei and Hiromasa, the story works on a similar principle of finding a solution to the problem, the righting of wrongs, or the restoring of balance. The archer had taken the peach from the tree and it was right that he returned it. This is similar to the “Ghost Market” story where the nobleman had to pay for the bowl of noodles he had consumed and the inlaid comb he had taken at the night-market. What is interesting here is the involvement of Doumon, the free yin-yang master who was not employed by anyone. He offered to help the archer, because he had drunk the wine that was placed outside the house (Baku, 2014, p. 182), and he felt it was his obligation to repay this treat by “performing a task” for him, although he would never risk his own life in doing so. In his way, Doumon is also being fair when he considered the wine as a fee for his service, and he had no intention of taking advantage of the situation and pocketing the peach himself. The satisfaction of reading this story comes from witnessing the heavenly treasure put back into the right hands and sent back to where it belonged; and also emotionally that the poor motherless child recovered from the unnamed illness with the help of the magic power of the celestial peach; on top of that, it is also that the free spirit yin-yang master acknowledging a favour and volunteering to do justice to the favour received and help the father. The two highest principles of mystery fiction, as stated by Malmgren, Truth and Justice, are both served in this story.

### **Story Three: “Journey of the Snake” [She Ji Xing]**

A government official returned to his hometown after four years of placement at another state. On his way he noticed a green snake following him at a distance, never near enough to attack him, but always trailing behind. He also noticed that at night the snake tried to approach his trunk of clothes. Before returning to his house, he came to Seimei for help. With Seimei’s intervention, a story of anger, pain,

frustration, hatred, and determination for justice across three lifetimes revealed itself. The snake embodied the spirit of a woman who used to be the mistress of a man. After a time her lover turned to another woman, and the pain of rejection was so great that she turned into a living spirit and followed her lover to the new mistress' place. Witnessing her lover's passion, she inhabited the body of the new mistress and killed her, but her lover did not return even then. Pain from unrequited love finally killed this rejected lover, and in her next reincarnation she sought to find the man and regain his love. After two reincarnations as a dog and an earthworm, finally as a snake in this life, she found him, who had also reincarnated from his previous life into a mouse! The mouse was hiding in the trunk of clothes of the official and the snake was waiting for a chance to catch it because someone had sewn a protective spell into the clothes. Seimei was pained by her insistent pursuit but finally he allowed her to catch the mouse and leave.

For once, the always sure Seimei was uncomfortable about how things turned out. He asked his friend "Hiromasa, this result, is it good?" (Baku, 2014, p. 107). Hiromasa, the romantic gentleman, remarked that it was as good as it could be, as it was following the nature of things, this human emotion. Depicting doubt in the experienced and powerful yin-yang master, Abe no Seimei, in this case is interesting because it shows how difficult it is to measure justice/fairness in matters of love. The snake-lady was deeply hurt by her lover's rejection, whether intentional or unintentional, and she had suffered this hurt for three lifetimes. The story has a very poignant description of her feelings over this extended period of time: "I can no longer say whether I had loved him before. At this moment, I cannot even tell whether I hate that man. I only know, that in my stomach there is a lump of hardness, like a bitter tumour, an emotion that is already set into a knot. Whether it is hatred or disgust, or love, I cannot tell ..." (Baku, 2014, p. 104). Tracking him down, finding him and holding him, is only a superficial righting of the wrong that he had done long time ago – he disappeared, and she got him now. If the hurt and the suffering over three lifetimes cannot be compensated, at least it is now known and acknowledged by the one who caused it. If this is not justice, at least this is the truth, and through this this story places itself squarely into contemporary mystery fiction.

#### **Story Four: Boat [Zhou]**

This is the dramatic story of a simple fisherman. He lived on his own by the lake and had the simplest life. One day someone approached him and offered to hire him and his boat for several nights to carry something across the lake. The fisherman agreed, and thus the nightly delivery started. Every night, he started with an empty boat, and stopped in the middle of the lake to pick up six passengers, whose names were called out by the person who hired him. He then rowed the human cargo to the other side, where they got off. After eight nights, all the delivery was done, and the person who hired him disappeared too. Throughout this period he had never seen the face of a single passenger. Feeling uncomfortable as if he had participated in something dodgy, he came to consult Seimei. Seimei recognized the name of one of the passengers, a poet drowned the year before in the lake while creating his new pieces. Contextualizing the event in the background of the date, which was the year of "gou", a special year in the Onmyodo calendar which signified the Great Crossing of one of the gods, Seimei concluded that some unusual adventure would take place that very night. So all of them went to the fisherman's hut beside the lake and waited. At



midnight, they saw it – the Great Crossing of the god, led by the forty-eight homeless spirits, and followed by the Parade of the Hundred Demons. Indeed, Seimei had guessed correctly, the forty-eight homeless spirits were called upon to lead the crossing, and during the god’s visit to the West, they would be brought to the Buddha and granted redemption. After the parade was gone, Seimei, Hiromasa, and the fisherman all sat under the Plum tree and enjoyed the sweet scent of the plum blossoms and Hiromasa’s glorious music from his famous flute Futatsu.

In this closing story of the collection, the two basic principles of Truth and Justice in mystery fiction have been interestingly respected and satisfied. Truth comes in the form of Seimei’s clear and careful explanation, which allows the three characters a chance to witness the once-in-a-lifetime event of the God’s Great Crossing. Justice however is more complicated as there was nothing missing, stolen or taken. The only “problem” is the fisherman’s uncomfortable feeling that he might have helped in something criminal or wrong. In this case, the revelation of the truth is justice observed. Both justice and truth were satisfied at the same time when Seimei explained the signs which led to the event. The final image of the grand and peaceful celebration of the Great Crossing is also the celebration that nothing had gone wrong, indeed forty-eight homeless spirits were redeemed. This is a higher sense of justice, and the emotional satisfaction comes perhaps from this justice being served.

## **Conclusion**

From the enormously popular Japanese fiction series *Onmyoji* by Yumemakura Baku, four stories have been taken from the latest collection in an attempt to explain their popularity through a sense of satisfaction that justice has been observed. Justice in this discussion is referring to the content of the stories, which are modelled very much like mystery fiction, with a problem in the core, and satisfactory closure depending on the two major principles of Truth and Justice being respected. Similar to conventional mystery fiction, the onmyoji stories always satisfy readers’ expectation of the truth, but justice is more complex both in terms of its representation and in the author’s attempt to discuss it. The content and outcome of these selected stories demonstrate the difficulty of defining and measuring justice in exact terms, but at the same time suggest a general, and commonly shared sense of “fairness” (for lack of a better word) among readers.

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