Modern Family and Subversions in Yasunari Kawabata’s *The Sound of the Mountain*

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When psychic problems started to arouse concern in the Modern period, our Western neighbors sought solution from us in the Eastern world. For instance, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) suggested the practice of Yoga (2004: 12). Yoga, as an essential part of Indian culture, is highly associated with silent meditation in Zen Buddhism. The idea of truth seeking in Buddhist Zen has strong influence towards Oriental ideology and this can be verified by Yasunari Kawabata’s (1899–1972) acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize in 1968. He reminded his readers that “Truth is in the discarding of words, it lies outside words” (1973: 109, original emphasis). Kawabata implied that truth can be found in silence, and this recalls how Zen Buddhism emphasizes on the importance to “quiet down the self”, so that “the egocentric self disappears” and “the person will naturally behave in a moral way” (Leary 153). It is through taking the path of Zen that a person can forgo the bad ego and regain a moral self.

However, as Western elements were imported to strengthen the country’s defense against foreign threats, it became doubtful whether Zen ideology can resist psychic shocks brought by the eventual replacement of Japanese traditions by Western modernity. In Kawabata’s *The Sound of the Mountain* (1954), the old protagonist
Shingo faces psychic struggles in the world of moral decay. This essay aims to investigate how the influx of Western culture in modern Japan upsets traditional family roles and gives rise to psychic issues related to moral dilemma.

I. Kawabata and His Modernist Approach

Yasunari Kawabata lived at the time when Western elements did not merely influence Japanese lifestyle, but also people's ideology and their intellectual dimension. Being a member of the New Sensationalists, Kawabata "explored the modernists and sometimes surrealist territory marked out by James Joyce and the like" (Mostow 141). He has vastly applied the modernist technique of stream of consciousness in his works. In terms of themes, the everyday details depicted in his works, such as the rise of Western architecture and the abandonment of conventional costumes, reveal how Western elements brought heterogenetic changes to the Japanese society. Heterogenetic changes refer to alterations that happen to a society due to influences from the outside, rather than alterations that generate within that society. (Roland 72) Some of the notions raised in Kawabata's stories revealed the shocks that brought to the Japanese society as a result of Western influence. Living in a period when Japanese traditions were constantly challenged by modern standards from the Western world, the old protagonist in The Sound of the Mountain, Shingo, witnesses the shaping of modern Japanese family by new social values.

II. Communication Barrier and Loneliness in the Modern World

In The Sound of the Mountain, the depictions of communication barrier among married couples and generation gap between traditional parents and children who have embraced modern values reflect the crisis faced by traditional Japanese families in the modern world. The novel highlights the problematic marriages in a family with two generations living under the same roof, as in the Japanese convention. The communication barrier between Shingo and his aged wife Yasuko, and the extramarital affair of Shingo's son Shuichi confirm Edward Seidensticker's observation that "Kawabata's great theme was loneliness, the impossibility of love—in short, alienation" (qtd. Kimball 95–96).

Shingo's loneliness as an ageing old man is revealed both physically and spiritually. The narrator portrays that he used to take warmth from his wife at night but "now they slept apart" (Kwabata, 1996: 126, hereafter page only). This is a significant clue that demonstrates the rather distant relationship between them.
Though the couple’s old age is an indication of their sexual dysfunction, Shingo dreams of sleeping with a young girl:

Shingo had slept with a girl in the dream, but now, in the evening, he could not remember whether or not it had been one of the daughters.

He remembered clearly having touched someone, but he had no notion who she might have been. He could remember nothing that even gave him a hint. (31)

While ageing has seemingly put an end to Shingo’s erotic desire towards his wife in reality, he has unconsciously released his repressed desire in dreams. That he dreams of sleeping with a young girl is an illustration on how the impossibility of achieving physical intimacy with his wife in reality is transformed into a form of virtual contact in his fantasy. Besides, Shingo’s vague memory regarding the girl that he has encountered in the dream confirms Freud’s suggestion on how the patient is unaware of bringing repressed memories in the past to the present:

The patient is unable to remember all that is repressed within him, especially perhaps its most essential elements, and thus fails to be convinced that the interpretation presented to him is the correct one. Instead he is driven to repeat the repressed matter as an experience in the present, instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past, which is what the physician would much rather see happen. (Freud, 2003: 56, original emphasis)

Shingo’s dream is thus a representation of how his repressed desire in the young days in the past is brought to his ageing self at present. That Shingo and his wife sleep apart thus symbolizes his resistance against the aged self at present. This resistance can partly explain for Shingo’s closeness to his young daughter-in-law, Kikuko. Kikuko reminds Shingo of his young days and the unattainable love in the past. Consequently, Shingo encounters moral dilemma and he has to control his adoration towards his daughter-in-law.

Another reason that explains for Shingo’s closeness with Kikuko is her possession of traditional Japanese virtue. Shingo’s own children represent young generation in Japan being shaped by modern values, which are considered as revolutionary and sometimes incomprehensible from his perspective. The existence of generation gap between Shingo and his children is thus a result of the rapid influx of Western elements in the post-war period that results in their growing divergence of opinion.

The major conflict that happens to Shingo and his son Shuichi is related to their dissimilar view on extra-marital affair. Freud argues that “[Western] civilization is,
generally speaking, founded on the suppression of instincts” (1997: 15). Western scholars travelling to Japan in the sixteenth century were shocked by the community’s “lack of sexual shame” (Perez 259). In view of the above observations, it seems that Shuichi’s extra-marital affair is rooted in his culture. However, Shingo believes that it is too early for Shuichi to have extra-marital affair, for Shuichi has married Kikuko a short period of time only. Shingo views extra-marital affair as a middle-age crisis. He commented that “there are plenty of fine gentlemen in their fifties and sixties who spend their nights wandering around because they’re afraid of their wives” (67). His thought reveals that extra-marital affair is considered as both acceptable and understandable for couples who have married long enough.

Shingo’s inability to comprehend his son’s mind mostly lies on his traditional view towards Japanese women. His impression towards Shuichi’s mistress is that she is no different from a prostitute. He cannot understand why his son prefers a prostitute instead of a pure woman like Kikuko:

Had he wanted to find a prostitute in his bride? There was astonishing ignorance in the fact, and Shingo felt in it too a frightening paralysis of the soul [...] Did Shuichi not feel the cleanness in her? The pale, delicate, childlike face of Kikuko, baby of her family floated before him. (105)

Shingo thinks that Shuichi is ignorant as he favors a mistress who looks like a prostitute, rather than “a good wife” (104). However, Shuichi’s indulgence with the mistress does not mean he wants to turn her into his wife. He has no intention of asking for a divorce and it is more likely that he wants both a virtuous wife and a seductive mistress at the same time. His mentality affirms how the young generation in modern Japan faces moral dilemma in fulfilling family obligation and satisfying individual desire at the same time. As for Shingo, he feels that he is living in a world in which all conventional values are now subverted.

Shingo’s unusual fondness towards Kikuko due to his state of loneliness and her resemblance of his young lover results in tensions within the family. For instance, Shingo’s overprotection of Kikuko arouses jealousy and suspicion from his children. His daughter, Fusako, does not like the idea that her father treats the daughter-in-law better than the way he treats her. She is rather jealous of Kikuko. His son, Shuichi, finds his father’s teachings hypocritical and annoying:

Shuichi frowned. After a moment of silence he said: “You needn’t behave so properly with an outsider.”
“An outsider? Isn’t she your own wife?”

“That’s why I’m saying. You needn’t behave yourself so properly with your son’s wife.”

“What do you mean?”

Shuichi did not answer. (117)

From Shuichi’s point of view, his misbehaving father is far from being qualified to teach him a lesson on morality. Shuichi’s words reflect his doubts towards his father’s morality. He even considers his father as hypocritical in behaving properly in front of Kikuko. Though conventional patriarchy forms the basis of traditional Japanese society, Shinto as the ethnic religion “is more concerned with what is ritually appropriate versus that which is polluting” (Perez 259). Here Shuichi’s behavior on condemning his father’s incestuous intention has actually demonstrated his traditional aspect.

Shuichi’s mistrust towards his father can be explained by the traditional Japanese perception that “Except for an implied condemnation of incest, Shinto viewed sexuality as natural, normal, and appropriate human behavior” (Perez 259 – 260). Having difficulty to face his father’s subversion of the family’s moral code, Shuichi distances Kikuko’s relationship with the family by referring her as “an outsider” (117).

On the other hand, Shingo considers Shuichi’s disobedience as a subversion of patriarchal hegemony. Still, Shingo eventually shows his awareness regarding his unusual protection over Kikuko:

It was a little abnormal, Shingo could see, for him to feel a sensual resentment toward his son because of his son’s wife; but he could not help himself.

There was an undercurrent running through his life, the abnormality that made Shingo, drawn to Yasuko’s sister, marry Yasuko, a year his senior, upon the sister’s death; was it exacerbated by Kikuko? (105)

The pure quality that Kikuko possesses reminds him of the beautiful sister of his wife Yasuko. That sister passed away at her young age. Nostalgia in elderly people is a recurring motif in Kawabata’s novels. For instance, in Thousand Cranes (1952), Mrs. Ota recalls her old lover upon meeting that lover’s son. In addition to the nostalgia regarding Shingo’s beautiful sister-in-law, his incestuous desire is driven away by the sense of pureness in Kikuko. In this aspect, his evilness is somehow purified by the innocent quality of a girl. (Lau 6 – 13) This process of purification is
another recurring motif in Kawabata’s works. Roy Starrs pointed out that it is a “usual procedure” for “the narcissistic Kawabata male, who seeks to purify himself through the love of a virginal girl” (Starrs 145). For instance, In The Izu Dancer (1926), the young protagonist’s insidious sexual desire is controlled upon realizing the pure quality of a teenage girl. Just like Shingo, his mind has been purified.

III. Subversion of Roles and Family Violence

In The Sound of the Mountain, loneliness and communication problem between family members result in the subversion of roles and even family violence. Though Shingo is the patriarchal head, with the influx of Western ideology into traditional Japanese society, his son Shuichi becomes independent from him. Shuichi has made important decisions on his own without Shingo’s consent. On the other hand, Kikuko is too fond of the father-in-law, making her a suspected patient of the Electra Complex. Shingo has somehow taken over the role of her real father. Meanwhile, from Shingo’s perspective, his relationship with Kikuko is doubtlessly closer than that with his own daughter or with his wife.

Shingo’s psychic dilemma serves as a repetition of his repressed past. As Kikuko’s beauty and innocent quality remind Shingo of the sister-in-law he adores in the young days, Shingo’s incestuous affection towards Kikuko at present is a repetition of a similar forbidden and unattainable ideal in the past:

> What was wrong with loving Kikuko in a dream? What was there to fear, to be ashamed of, in a dream? And indeed what would be wrong with secretly loving her in his waking hours? He tried this new way of thinking. (210)

Shingo’s interior monologue above reveals his psychic dilemma. We can see how he has first convinced himself that loving Kikuko secretly is all right. However, he actually understands that the act is immoral and can only be kept as a secret. Loving her in a dream further implies that he has repressed his affection towards her in reality. This repressed emotion can only be released when he is dreaming. When he dreams, he is actually in a realm of the unconscious:

> The most usual form of investigating the “unconscious” is by means of dream analysis, for as speech is the language of the conscious, dreams are the language of the “unconscious”. (Hadfield 188)

As a result of loneliness, it is apparent that Shingo cannot stop himself from loving Kikuko, both consciously and unconsciously. His role as the father-in-law of Kikuko
has changed. He has actually become the secret admirer of Kikuko. His caring attitude is a warning to his children and worsens their parent-and-child relationships.

Tensions among various family members are further developed by the occurrence of family violence in both the physical and spiritual contexts. In the state of drunkenness, Shuichi imposes physical violence upon Kikuko:

She seemed to be holding Shuichi up.

"Please. You’re hurting me." It was Kikuko. "You’re pulling my hair with your left hand."

"Am I?"
The two of them fell down in the kitchen. (127)

The novel features the reciprocal nature of interactions within the family. For instance, Shingo’s over-protection towards his daughter-in-law Kikuko arouses jealousy from his own daughter. As for the married couple of Shuichi and Kikuko, the unfaithfulness of the husband involving in an extra-marital affair results in the wife’s desperate abortion. In this sense, both the husband and the wife impose spiritual torture upon each other:

The expression “husband-wife march” meant only that a husband and wife alone, putting up with each other’s misdeeds, deepened the marsh with the years.

That was probably because the wife awoke to herself in confrontation with the husband’s misdeeds. (129)

While Shuichi is involved in the extra-marital relationship, Kikuko is pregnant. She decides to have an abortion as she cannot bear having a child with an unfaithful husband. Her choice of abortion shows how family violence affects the next generation. The infant is killed in the war between the parents. In addition, Kikuko risks her own life in the induced abortion. Shingo is angry that Shuichi agrees to this inconceivable act without discussing with him. He blames his son for killing the heir and the spiritual hope of the family:

“Kikuko knows how much Yasuko wants grandchildren. So much that she feels guilty about taking so long. She doesn’t have the baby she wants to have, and that’s because you’ve murdered her spiritually.” (169)

Since Shuichi’s extra-marital affair is the main cause that initiates his wife’s decision on abortion, he has murdered his child indirectly. Furthermore, he has murdered his wife in the spiritual sense, turning her from a woman who longs for being a mother.
into a mother who has killed her child in desperation. The setting of the story is post­war Japan, where people have experienced the cruelty of the Second World War, Shingo is sad that even after the war, the baby is still subjected to the war between the parents. Facing the subverted views of the young generation, Shingo is not quite sure whether the established values in his mind require adjustments in the new society.

Just like many other Kawabata's novels, the notion of ageing is depicted. Many of Shingo's friends are dead and he also experiences symptoms of ageing. For example, he cannot tie his necktie. (256) The symptom implies that his day of death is getting near as well. The realization of his ageing is followed by his understanding that the society has to hand over to the next generation soon. He then suggests Shuichi and Kikuko move out from the family and live on their own. (271) This suggestion is a revelation of how he has finally compromised to the new modern order. He starts to accept the changing world and the new ideologies of the young generation, though he somehow disagrees with their thoughts in many different ways.

IV. The Return to Zen

In *The Sound of the Mountain*, the juxtaposition of traditional and modern ideologies triggers communication barrier between various members of the family. Psychic dilemmas are resulted as the characters struggle between their own selfish desires and obligations related to their corresponding family roles. Their selfish individual desire can be viewed as an extension of Western individualism that challenges conventional concerns over family and kinship ties in the modern age. While Shingo blames his son's incomprehensible thoughts as related to the subverted modernity, he has actually unconsciously subverted the moral code of the family due to the release of his own repressed desire. His inappropriate behavior of trespassing the identity from a father-in-law to a secret admirer of Kikuko reflects how the old generation in Japan is also responsible for subverting the nation's virtue.

Shingo's final decision on initiating his son to move out with Kikuko carries significant implications. Viewing the novel as an allegory of modern Japanese society, his decision exhibits how the old generation admits both the inexorable nature of modernity and the new social order based on family rather than patriarchy. At the individual level, the decision prevents him from developing further incestuous intimacy with Kikuko. This further represents his abandonment of personal desires in the hope of a more fruitful marriage for the next generation. His action shows that he
has returned to the path of Zen. He can finally control his egocentric self in regaining a moral self.

Notes:
[1] Donald Keene commented that the Meiji Restoration in 1868 "had fundamentally changed both the culture of Japan and its position in the world" (24).

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