

The Effect of the U.S. Occupation on the Japanese Male as seen in the Stories “American Hijiki” and “The American School”

Lori Ludtke

Summary

Asians Studies scholars in attempting to describe the differing psychological orientations of Japanese and Westerners refer to them respectively as “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures”. *Haji* or shame and guilt are examined from both an Eastern and Western perspective. This paper focuses on two modern Japanese short stories linked to the aftermath of World War II and the U.S. occupation of Japan, Kojima Nobuo’s “The American School” and Nosaka Akiyuki’s “American Hijiki”. These stories provide many illustrations of Japanese men who carry deep wounds of shame, both a collective sense of shame stemming from their country’s defeat in the war and subsequent occupation and also shame for their individual misdeeds and shortcomings. “The American School” is set in Japan shortly after the war and tells the story of some Japanese teachers of English who have been invited to a teaching demonstration at an American school. The teachers try to project confidence but struggle internally with their sense of shame. The story “American Hijiki” is set in the 1960’s in Japan. The main character is Toshio who as a teen-ager survived in post war Japan by dealing in the black market and by using his limited English to act as a pimp for Japanese woman whose customers were American soldiers. His memories of this time begin to surface when his wife invites an American couple to stay at their home in Tokyo. After reluctantly meeting them he falls back into the role of the pimp and decides to exact revenge for the grief, humiliation and shame he suffered as a young man. In both of these stories the characters attempts to avoid shame and to bring shame upon others only seem to compound it. These stories show us clearly the crippling effects of shame on the human psyche.

Asian studies scholars in attempting to describe the differing psychological orientations of Japanese and Westerners refer to them respectively as “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures”. Ruth Benedict in her anthropological study of Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the*

Sword, defines haji as a failure to follow culturally accepted rules of behavior, failure to balance obligations or to foresee contingencies.”¹ She goes on to say that a person in a shame culture “orients himself toward the verdict of others.”² Benedict describes shame as having the same place of authority in Japanese ethics that having a clear conscience or avoiding sin have in Western ethics. A person who is sensitive to shame will carry out the rules of behavior that society has laid down. There is a sense of being judged by society. Westerners are, generally speaking, driven to behave ethically more by an individual sense of guilt. Of course both guilt and shame are universal conditions from which anyone may suffer. In western psychology we find a slightly different definition of shame from that of the Japanese. “Shame is a discrepancy between what the person wants to be and the way the person is identified socially.”³ Here the focus is much more on the individual's aspirations for himself and how they are actually seen in society and not with a complex set of rules imposed on the individual to which he must conform. Dr. Paula Sunray provides a very simple and clear explanation of the difference between a person suffering from guilt and one suffering from shame. She says, “A person suffering from guilt will ask what they did wrong whereas a person suffering from shame will ask what is wrong with me.”⁴ In Japan and in Western countries cultural differences may lead us to define shame differently, but the way shame manifests itself in the behavior of the individual is the same. A person suffering from shame is in great emotional pain. Neenan and Dryden, in their book, *Life Coaching*, describe the feelings and actions of one experiencing shame in the following excerpt. “When you feel ashamed, you want to remove yourself from the gaze of others or greatly wish the ‘ground to open up and swallow me’. If you cannot withdraw from the situation, you may avoid eye contact or keep your head bowed to avoid what you perceive will be harsh scrutiny from others. However, feeling trapped in the situation may increase your level of agitation and draw further attention to yourself. Once free of the situation, you may try to avoid going there again as you assume people will never forget your behavior and point and stare at you when you return.”⁵ Shame is a crippling condition.

This paper looks at two modern Japanese short stories linked to the aftermath of World War II and the U.S. occupation of Japan. The stories are “The American School” by Kojima Nobuo and “American Hijiki” by Nosaka Akiyuki. These stories contain many examples of the overwhelming sense of disgrace, defeat and shame experienced by the Japanese as a whole and by the men in particular. These men carry the deep pain of shame which only becomes worse when they try to avoid it. It divides them from themselves and from others and is a condition from which they can't escape.

In “The American School” , it is the meek rabbit-eyed character of Isa, who seems to

embody most clearly the collective feelings of defeat and disgrace that the Japanese male felt under the tutelage of the American occupation. At the meeting for the Japanese teachers before the visit to the American school the teacher named Yamada expresses his concern that the Americans already despise the Japanese as a defeated people and he suggests that the teachers all put their best foot forward to try to override these feelings. Later, when Isa is crippled by blisters from the leather shoes he borrowed in order to avoid wearing his army boots, Yamada's worst fears are realized. When Isa begins to hold the group back as they walk to the American school Yamada says, "If this keeps up we will all be late. We will be disgraced. The main thing is to make sure that the Americans don't see him. Oh, for shame!"⁶

Even though it looks to Yamada that Isa is weak and disgraceful we know from an earlier part of the story that there is a pride and a justifiable rage that is operating beneath his foolish looking behavior. Rather than having to speak English to the Americans, he chooses to go to great measures to avoid what seems to be the ultimate defeat, becoming like the Americans. Early in the story when Isa is selected to be a translator for a black American soldier he becomes so uncomfortable that he runs away. When the soldier comes into the woods after him Isa shouts to him. "You'll have to speak our language. Speak Japanese or else! What would you do if someone really said that to you?"⁷ The irony is that the most honest and real attempt to communicate with an American in the story is made by Isa at this point, but it is a wasted attempt in that Isa uses Japanese which sounds to the American soldier like "Japanese Gibberish".

Later in the story when Isa arrives at the American school ahead of the other teachers we begin to see more clearly the manifestations of shame in him. When Isa first sees the American students and hears their "soft voices, sweet and clear as a mountain stream" he comes to the conclusion that "he and his colleagues were members of a pathetic race which has no place here."⁸ His pride of race seems to have dissolved in the face of the overwhelming sense of inferiority he experiences upon seeing the American school. But moments later Isa realizes "the fear and horror that language has always inspired in him." While at the same time his own inner voice whispered: "It is foolish for Japanese to speak this language like foreigners. If they do, it makes them foreigners too. And that is the real disgrace."⁹ Isa, in the face of his fear and sense of humiliation, seems to have formed a defensive mask in attempt to salvage his pride. To lose his Japanese identity by speaking the English language looks to him to be the real defeat, as opposed to the others who fear being disgraced because they cannot meet the Americans expectations.

When the other teachers arrive at the school they too are struck by the discrepancy

between the Americans school and their own schools and by the bearing of the Americans in comparison to their own. One teacher asks, “What can we expect to learn from classes held in a place like this? The only lesson that we will leave with is the one we learned in just getting here. We lost!”¹⁰ The teacher Yamada, who chopped off heads of the Americans during the war, was still concerned with impressing the Americans. He wanted the teachers to “put their best foot forward and bargain from their strength.” But after the agreement he made with the principal of the American school to do a teaching demonstration falls through, we see the futility of his attempts to bury his shame and impress the Americans. When Yamada explains that the accident that caused the principal to call off the demonstration was due to the teacher’s “devotion to the English language” he doesn’t catch the sarcasm of the principal who attributes the teachers devotion to the kamakaze spirit. Yamada and the other teachers who think like him are willing and able to speak English, but they are not capable of understanding the differences that divide them from the Americans. Yamada denies Japan’s defeat as his soldierly masculinity is threatened if he admits to it. While Isa may appear weak at least he has an internal awareness of the emotional pain he is in and he maintains some sense of integrity. Yamada has surrendered even that.

The story “American Hijiki” also explores the psychological effect of the U.S. occupation on Japanese men who lived through it. In this story we meet Toshio, who was a young man during World War II, in his life in Japan of the 1960’s. The upcoming arrival of an American couple that his wife befriended in Hawaii triggers dreams and memories of his first encounters with Americans at the time of the occupation. The sight of the air-mail envelope from his wife’s friends causes “an unpleasant commotion in his chest.”¹¹ As we learn more about the conditions the Japanese has to endure and what Toshio had to do to help his family survive, we realize that Toshio continues to suffer from the emotional wounds from that time, which although mostly buried, never healed.

Toshio’s father was killed in the war, his mother became an invalid and his little sister had to run the house. He had to quit school so he could find work to support his family. One day, Toshio was approached by a young Japanese woman who engaged his services as a pimp. It was while acting as a broker for the woman with the soldiers and the black market that Toshio got to see what many Japanese had been reduced to in order to survive. Toshio himself utilizes the minimal English he knows from school to speak what he calls “whore English” in his role as the Naka-no-shima pimp. As he recalls his life during this time Yoshio reflects that “nobody who has had the experience of begging from an American soldier could carry on a free and easy conversation with an American.”¹²

Toshio also recalls feelings of anger and self-pity when at one point his families weekly food ration turns out to be chewing gum, which does nothing to stop their hunger. Since he was able to sell it on the black market for corn flour he tells us that he has no reason to be bitter, but it becomes clear throughout the story that bitterness toward the Americans still resides in his heart.

Toshio, like the characters in "The American School", also experiences a deep sense of inferiority to the Americans. Toshio recall the words of his social studies teacher who tells the class that "a basic difference in physical strength is manifest in national strength." The Americans are seen by the young Toshio, as shining stars, with muscular arms, massive chests and powerful buttocks. Any illusions he had harbored from his judo instructor's portrayal of the Americans as "weak below the waste" were shattered when he saw the soldiers with arms like roof beams and hips like millstones. He asks, how can you not feel ashamed?

Upon the Higgins' arrival Toshio has decided not to speak English to them. He resolves to strike back at the enemy. He is taken aback when it turns out that Mr. Higgins speaks some Japanese as he had spent a year in Japan as part of the U.S. occupation forces. To our surprise Toshio seems to go out of his way to entertain Mr. Higgins and seems to feel almost at home with him when he discovers that "the old dog likes the girls" and he becomes "convinced that he would be providing inadequate service if he failed to find Higgins a woman".¹⁴ Even he can't understand why he would want to do so much for an American who brings up so many bitter memories. But later he realizes that "the reason I'm doing all this service for Higgins is that somehow, one way or another, I want to bring him to his knees. I don't care if it's by drinking him unconscious or driving him crazy over a woman, I want to turn this grinning, maddeningly self-possessed son of a bitch on to something? anything? Japanese and make him knuckle under. That's what I am after!"¹⁵ Later Toshio takes Higgins to see a live sex act show. The male performer's inability to have an erection comes to symbolize the humiliation that Japanese men experienced under the U.S. occupation. The performer's shame becomes Toshio's shame and the shame of his country. Later when Toshio returns home his wife complains about the Higgins' selfishness and wonders how long they think they can stay at their home. Toshio comments, "Higgins will go back sooner or later, I suppose. But it won't make any difference. As long as I live, there will be an American sitting inside me like a ton of bricks, and every now and then this American, will drag me around by the nose ...because what I have is the Great American Allergy."¹⁶

These characters lived through amazingly difficult times and to survived at all is a testament to their strength. Edwin O. Reishauer in his book, *The Allied Occupation: Catalyst Not*

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Creator, describes Japan as being physically exhausted by the war and plunged into spiritual and intellectual confusion. The character Toshio gives an example of this when he talks of his job at a gun emplacement on the Osaka Bay. Toward the end of the war he was helping to shoot back at the Americans and then three months later he was cleaning up to receive them as guests. So it is no wonder that we see the Japanese men in these stories, who lived through the war and occupation, struggling to remain whole but being undermined by a sense of defeat, inferiority and shame. The crippling effects of the shame, divides them from the Americans, from their fellow Japanese, and prevents them from experiencing their own self worth and emotional wholeness.

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