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Short Essay

Examine mono-no-aware in a chapter of the Tale of Genji

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The Tale of Genji, authored by Murasaki Shikibu (973-1014) in the eleventh century during the Heian period¹, is widely regarded as a Buddhist parable in classical Japanese literature and has been subject to scholarly debate for many centuries in Japan. Literary theorist, Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), sought to explore the intricate association between the novel and the ancient anthology of Japanese poetry, Manyoshu, resulting in the derivation of the concept of *mono no aware* that has been a pervasive theme in the aforementioned works². According to Norinaga, the function of Japanese poetry, which is abundant in the novel, is not to convey the concept of *mono no aware* but to embody it in a performative manner. The *aware* of things, akin to a sigh, is a natural reaction, and posits that Japanese poetry serves as the quintessential discourse for *mono no aware*, as it encapsulates the performative practice of language. Although the interpretation of *mono no aware* has evolved over time, it essentially entails the “pathos” (aware) of “things” (mono), which is linked to the poignant sentiment of transience³. This notion is deeply rooted in Japanese art and bears an affinity with the Buddhist principle of the ephemeral nature of life and the impermanence of things⁴. The Buddhist priest, Yoshida Kenko (1283-1350), highlights the interconnection between the transience and beauty in his *Essays on Idleness*, stating, “If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty”⁵. This essay aims to further explore the concept of *mono no aware* in chapter ten, the Sacred Tree, of The Tale of Genji.

Chapter ten of the Tale of Genji showcases Shikibu’s exceptional ability to depict characters, objects, events, and their relationships with a sense of *mono no aware*. The chapter is set against the backdrop of the novel’s protagonist, prince Genji, who showed dwindling affection towards his former lover, the Rokujo lady⁶. As a result, the Rokujo lady set to leave with her priestess daughter for Ise. Upon learning the news, Genji sets out to meet her at the shrine in a futile attempt to reconcile. The author effectively employs the natural setting to convey *aware*. The scene took place in autumn to provide the perfect atmosphere, and Genji traverses a ‘reed plain of melancholy beauty’ while listening to ‘the hum of insects’. In an effort to bring the reader closer to the scene and instil in him a profound feeling of *aware*, the author breathes life into

¹ (Tyler & Shikibu, 2001)

² (Yoda, 1999)

³ (Ward, 2022)

⁴ (Laigne, 2012)

⁵ (Keene, 1998)

⁶ The Tale of Genji, p.171

inanimate objects *'the wind whistling through the pines brought snatches of music'* while embracing the beauty in imperfection⁷ *'The shrine gates, of unfinished logs, had a grand and awesome dignity for all their simplicity'*⁸. What is particularly interesting is the interaction between the two former lovers due to its lack of a turbulent outpouring of romantic emotions, but was rather characterised by a restrained demeanour and a careful choice of words. Furthermore, the encounter exudes an elegant pathos, as Genji stands on the veranda, speaking to the lady behind the curtains through a branch from the sacred tree which symbolises their love. Genji departs at dawn with tears and dew drenching his sleeves, remarking, *'a dawn farewell is always drenched in dew, but sad is the autumn sky as never before'*⁹.

Genji's failure to cherish the love of those around him until they are either gone or the bonds have been irreparably severed is a prime example of *mono no aware*. An exemplification of this is Genji's relationship with Fujitsubo, the Emperor's wife, and Genji's mother. Due to overwhelming guilt and fear of the public discovering that her son, the heir, is Genji's offspring, Fujitsubo cuts ties with Genji. As a result, both characters experienced suffering in their own unique way. On the one hand, Genji withdraws to the Uji Temple on a remote island and stays in seclusion, despite his growing loneliness and without communicating with Fujitsubo for some time. On the other hand, Fujitsubo's ultimate decision to take the tonsure to protect her son is an act of resignation to the transience of life and the inevitability of separation¹⁰. Although it remains clear that her strained relationship with Genji is the chief reason behind her decision, the aesthetic of suffering and its connection to Buddhism's noble truths becomes more relevant. In addition, the reader is able to discern that taking the tonsure can be a double-edged sword - a source of healing and suffering simultaneously¹¹. The following excerpt serves as an exemplification of that:

*'... she turned ever more fervently to her prayers, telling herself that the security of her son was the important thing. Her secret worries sometimes approached real terror. She would pray that by way of recompense for her own sufferings his burden of guilt be lightened, and in the prayer she would find comfort.'*¹²

⁷ (English, 2016)

⁸ The Tale of Genji, p. 172

⁹ The Tale of Genji, p. 173

¹⁰ (Shirane, 1987)

¹¹ (Barnes, 1989)

¹² The Tale of Genji, p. 188

In conclusion, Chapter ten of the Tale of Genji is replete with instances of *mono no aware*. It is most prominently expressed through the use of poetry in the author's writing that constantly reminds the readers of the transient beauty of the world, the impermanence of life, the inevitability of separation, and the aesthetics of suffering, which resonates with the aim of Zen Buddhism¹³. In retrospect, *aware* was employed throughout the novel such that it transcends the commonly expressed feelings such as happiness and sorrow, merging them into a new more intangible emotion¹⁴. This begs a question regarding whether *mono no aware* is uniquely Japanese emotion that has no comparable in other cultures. This notion is particularly compelling when considering Japan's cultural response to cherry blossoms, whose fleeting beauty resembles the essence of *mono no aware*¹⁵.

Word Count: 959

The lines from chapter ten that had the greatest impact on me in terms of *mono no aware* are as follows:

*'Happy are they whose place in the world puts them beneath such notice! The great ones of the world live sadly constricted lives.'*¹⁶

*'Two bereavements in successive years had informed him of the futility of human affairs. He thought once more of leaving the world. Alas, too many bonds still tied him to it.'*¹⁷

*'... the priests put new flowers before the images, and the chrysanthemums and the falling leaves of varied tints, though the scene was in no way dramatic, seemed to offer asylum in this life and hope for the life to come. And what a purposeless life was his!'*¹⁸

¹³ (L. Boyer, 2020)

¹⁴ (Saito, 1997)

¹⁵ (Tsutsui, 2004)

¹⁶ The Tale of Genji, p. 174

¹⁷ The Tale of Genji, p. 176

¹⁸ The Tale of Genji, p. 181

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