

# **The Remains of the Japanese Empire: Tsushima Yūko's All Too Barbarian; Reed Boat, Flying; and Wildcat Dome**

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**Tsushima in *INK Literary Monthly* (Taipei, February 2011)**

**Abstract:** This article focuses on three of Tsushima Yūko’s later works. It examines Tsushima’s criticism of Japanese ruling policy, especially aboriginal policies in colonial Taiwan, in *All Too Barbarian*. The second, *Reed Boat, Flying*, exposes the repressed history of how, just after Japan’s defeat in the Second World War, Japanese women returning from Manchuria who were raped by Russian or other foreign soldiers were forced into having abortions. *Wildcat Dome*, written after the 3.11 disasters, discloses how the inter-racial children born between Japanese women and American soldiers were discriminated against in postwar Japan.

**Keywords:** Tsushima Yūko, Taiwan, nuclear testing, discrimination, Japanese literature, *All Too Barbarian*, *Reed Boat, Flying*, *Wildcat Dome*

### The Shifting Focus of Tsushima Yūko and her Works

“A Birth” (Aru tanjō), published under the pen name Aki Yūko in the March, 1967 issue of *Bungei shuto*, marked the literary debut of Tsushima Yūko. She subsequently began using the pen name “Tsushima Yūko” with the 1969 publication of “Requiem: for Dogs and Grown-Ups” (Rekueimu: inu to otona no tame ni) and went on to become widely celebrated in literary circles. Her short story collection *The Mother in the House of Grass* (*Mugura no haha*, 1975) won the Tamura Toshiko Prize, while her novel *Child of Fortune* (*Chōji*, 1978) was awarded the Women’s Literature Prize. The defining characteristics of her works from this period were an “anti-modern” narrative form and the reclamation of a “non-maternal” reproductive sexuality, that is to say, a sexuality that does not presume a maternal instinct for reproduction. In the worlds of these narratives, males were depicted only in terms of their ability to satisfy women’s reproductive purposes or sexual desires.<sup>1</sup>

In subsequent works, the absence of the father and the strong bonds felt for an older brother with intellectual disabilities would emerge as central themes. In taking up the theme of family composition, her works shared thematic similarities with those from the same period by Nakagami Kenji, a fellow member of the coterie group surrounding the journal *Bungei shuto*. Another set of key motifs that would emerge in Tsushima’s *oeuvre* derived from her own life experiences of being raised in an all-female household and then as an adult experiencing marriage, divorce, life as a single mother, and the loss of a child. Such works expressed not only a yearning for a matrilineal society, but

also for liberation from the strictures of social norms surrounding sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Her novel *Nara Report* (*Nara repōto*, 2004) was awarded the 2007 Murasaki Shikibu Prize. The protagonist is a boy named Morio whose mother dies of cancer after having relations with a man who already has a wife and children and giving birth to Morio. Through a spirit medium, the boy establishes communication with his mother, reborn as a dove, and using her spirit power he goes on to smash to bits the Great Buddha in Nara, the symbol of Japanese Buddhism's golden age. The novel itself is composed of the broken fragments of the Great Buddha, its narrative formally enacting a return to the ancient period before the rise of Buddhist domination. As the narrative progresses, Tsushima hints that the repression of the burakumin outcaste group and the suppression of primitive matrilineal society were all products of collusion between the rising powers of the state and religion. Critic Katsumata Hiroshi showered high praise on the work, declaring that it showed Tsushima as “not only the literary heir to Nakagami Kenji, but also going beyond him.”<sup>2</sup> Nakagami's works are characterized by a tendency to render visible marginalized figures who are repressed and excluded by the nation-state. In *Nara Report*, Tsushima not only inherits Nakagami's literary heritage, but also brings it to a new level of realization through imagining her ideal form of a primitive matriarchal society.

Tsushima's later works, *All Too Barbarian* (*Amari ni yaban na*, 2008), *Reed Boat; Flying* (*Ashibune, tonda*, 2010), and *Wildcat Dome* (*Yamaneko dōmu*, 2013) expose the “buried history” of the Japanese empire. This trilogy of works—with its focus on ‘foreigners’ left behind in the nation-state of Japan, figures whose lives and deaths were tangled up in the conflicts arising from Japan's imperial expansion and whose struggles with the vicissitudes of history are now largely forgotten—forms in many ways

the essence of Tsushima's *oeuvre*.

### **Challenging the Empire of Male-Logos: *All Too Barbarian***

The novel *All Too Barbarian*—first serialized in the monthly *Gunzō* from June 2006 through May 2008 and then published in book form in 2008—is set in 1930s colonial Taiwan, on the periphery of the former Japanese empire. Before writing it, Tsushima visited Taiwan to carry out a detailed survey and investigation into the flora, insects, place names (new and old), and geographical features of the island. Using her characteristic technique of blurring boundaries between past and present, reality and dream, the novel attempts to depict the consciousness of 1930's Japanese settlers living in the colony, demonstrating how family, sexuality, and colonial rule formed an inseparable, interwoven complex structure. Rather than a state-centric narrative of official History, it zeroes in on the conditions of the colony through the perspective of one woman's ‘life history.’ As the author once remarked, “If we don't grasp how they lived in the colony as its rulers, there is no way for us to understand the tragedy that it represented.”<sup>3</sup>

Constructing the work around this perspective also had the effect of not only troubling the framework of the masculinist myth of Japanese ethnic homogeneity, it also exposed the complicity between the structures of the logos of state violence directed against colonial Taiwan and its aboriginal inhabitants and the male-centric logos that functions to oppress women. In the novel, the female protagonist Miyo's repeated mental breakdowns evoke the voice and image of Mouna Rudao, leader of the “Musha Incident,” a 1930 uprising of Taiwanese aborigines against the colonial regime.

According to Tsushima, the work had its origins in a “strange rumor” she once heard at a

gathering of wives of employees of a Japanese trading firm.

It was in a fancy condominium somewhere in Taipei, a nice place, maybe somewhere around the Tianmu neighborhood, I think. Three wives of elite Japanese trading firms were enjoying a tea party in one of its rooms. An elegant afternoon tea. Then suddenly these men carrying old savage swords burst in, killed one of the women instantly, raped another, and the third woman just lost it and went crazy—a really terribly thing. The person who told me this was deadly serious, really believed it was true: “No, it really happened. But you never hear about it because it is so terrible that the whole trading firm just looked away and no one ever talks about it.” Without thinking, I shot back, “Wait a minute, you really believe that story?” It sounded so implausible—I mean, where did the men come from, and wouldn’t the condominium be locked to begin with? And I said why would they be carrying savage swords in this day and age—none of it was remotely believable.<sup>4</sup>

Tsushima points out that the appearance of this sort of “gossip” is a product of distorted consciousness among Japanese concerning the Musha Incident. This triggered her interest in the Incident and ultimately led her to produce the novel *All Too Barbarian*.

As Tsushima discussed in a lecture she would later deliver in Taiwan, *All Too Barbarian* was also inspired by E.M. Forster’s 1924 *A Passage to India*—in particular, the novel’s depiction of the inseparable interrelationship between

sexuality and the colonies. The Musha Incident was the largest uprising by aboriginal peoples during the period of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, and in the postwar period a large number of Japanese novelists have depicted this massacre of Taiwan’s aboriginals with deep remorse, usually taking up ‘political correctness’ as their central theme. By contrast, Tsushima’s *All Too Barbarian* opens up completely new ground in the discourse surrounding the Musha Incident in the way her descriptive technique couples together the Musha Incident and the perspective of the colonizer Miyo, setting up multiple parallel and often crisscrossing points of view. It is no exaggeration to say that the subsequent boom in contemporary Japanese fiction representing the memory of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan was due to

Tsushima’s novel. As Tsushima herself noted, her purpose in depicting the Musha Incident was not “to provide reportage of the Incident or to provide a faithful recounting of what really happened,” but rather to understand how this tragedy was brought about by the “male-centric logos” underlying state violence.

The symbolic meaning of this work within Tsushima’s *oeuvre* lies in its transformation in the image of male characters. In *All Too Barbarian*, the heroine Ririko, Miyo’s niece, is unable to recover from the sadness of losing her son. She encounters Yang when traveling alone in Taiwan in the summer 2005. Yang is a Hakka Chinese in Taiwan burdened by the tragic past of having lost his wife and child in a traffic accident; he remarries and treats the stepchild his second wife has brought to their marriage with great affection. Yang relates to Ririko the terrible pain he experienced in losing his child. Such a father figure is unprecedented in Tsushima’s writings, seemingly a sign that the sense of being haunted by the shadowy ghost of the dead father was gradually lifting with the passage of time.

## Requiem for the “Invisible” People: *Reed Boat, Flying*

Following *All Too Barbarian*, Tsushima serialized *Reed Boat, Flying* in the *Mainichi* newspaper from April 2009 through May 2010. The work depicts the forced abortions administered to many women who were raped by Soviet troops who advanced into Manchukuo just before Japan’s surrender. The novel can be called a requiem for the unborn lives abandoned in this crack in historical time.

The narrative begins with a gathering of men and women who are on the cusp of old age. They have assembled for the funeral of an elementary school classmate, Michiko, who died after being attacked by *suzumebachi* giant hornets. As Yukihiro, Tatsuo, and Shōko—Michiko’s classmates—chat, they resurrect memories from their elementary school days in the final years of the war. As a result, connections of each of these classmates to the semi-colonial puppet-state of Manchukuo are revealed and various past secrets that faded from view over time are exposed. The parents of Michiko’s Soviet-American friend Sasha fled to northeastern China after the Russian Revolution. After the establishment of Manchukuo, they worked for a Japanese government agency. But following the Soviet military advance in August 1945, they are treated as spies. Sasha’s parents and siblings are beaten and die, and only Sasha manages to escape to America. Shōko’s mother Sanae (Anhua) is an orphan of Chinese citizenship; during the Manchukuo era, she is passed back and forth between Russian and Japanese foster families. Subsequently, she becomes pregnant with the child of the Japanese family’s son—but the child’s father is drafted and dies in battle. After the invasion by Soviet troops she is taken prisoner along with Japanese residents, because she is unable to prove that she is Chinese. In the internment camp, she meets a

young man named Takada and marries him and changes her name to Sanae. At a time of fierce combat between Chinese Communist and Nationalist forces, the couple undergo many trials before finally managing to board a repatriation ship. When they reach Hakuta harbor, pregnant Sanae is suspected of having been “illegitimately impregnated” and is threatened with an involuntary abortion. The appearance of her husband at this juncture allows her to avoid that fate, and as a result Shōko is able to be born.

At the work’s conclusion, an account provided by Yukihiro’s mother exposes a previously repressed incident of a massacre that took place during the history of postwar repatriation to Japan. Deep in the night some sixty years earlier, a person pounded on the door of Yukihiro’s mother’s house. When she opened the door, she found a classmate from her days at a girls’ school. After graduating, the classmate had emigrated to Manchukuo, where just before Japan’s surrender she was raped by Soviet soldiers as she was attempting to flee. She subsequently barely managed to survive by selling her body. When she boarded a repatriation boat to return to Japan, nearly all of the women around her were pregnant. Some even died after drinking rat poison in hopes of inducing a miscarriage. Upon landing in Japan, most of the women were placed in quarantine and subjected to forced abortions.

Tsushima’s depiction reveals a dark underside to the history of repatriation, the forced abortions imposed on pregnant unmarried women when they reached Japan. Tsushima herself testified that the work was based on actual historical incidents—the lives crushed in the implementation of forced abortions in every port as part of Japan’s “coastline defense strategy.”<sup>5</sup>

The oldest record of the “reed boat” that provides the work’s title comes from the *Kojiki*, an eighth-century chronicle of Japanese mythic

history. Reed boats are the oldest form of boats used by humans and function symbolically to suggest the image of humans sailing across the ocean of time. Following Japan's defeat in the war, the fetuses that resulted from Soviet troops' impregnation of Japanese women were nearly all eliminated as a matter of "state policy." As soon as repatriation ships reached Japanese harbors, involuntary abortions were imposed for the sake of protecting Japanese women and their 'pure blood,' so that countless unborn fetuses were swept beneath the rug under a shroud of darkness. The novel's title implies a message from the author—that these unborn fetuses sailed not on repatriation ships, but rather on "reed boats" that carried them up to heaven, where she hopes they continue to gaze down at us in the present moment. In this, we sense the author's prayer for these abandoned souls, who vanished anonymously beneath the stream of history, to rest in peace.

### **Postwar Japan as Depicted in *Wildcat Dome***

*Wildcat Dome* can be described as a novel that deconstructs the myth of the modern Japanese nation-state—the false myth that the modern Japanese state is constructed on the basis of 'pure' nationality and blood lineage. Its story is in some ways continuous with its predecessor, *Reed Boat, Flying*, in that it takes as its theme the mixed-race orphans born between Americans and Japanese during the American Occupation of Japan. The story's timespan stretches from the early postwar through the 3/11 earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster, tracing the lives of three childhood friends, Mitch (Michio), Kaz (Kazuo) and Yonko. Mitch and Kaz are mixed-race offspring of American Occupation soldiers and Japanese women. As babies, the two are discovered abandoned on the same day and handed over to a "facility" for mixed-race orphans run by 'Mother Asami' for the children of

American/Japanese parents. At the age of three, both become the adopted sons of 'Sister Yae.' Yonko's mother is a cousin of Sister Yae, which is how the three come together as childhood friends.

Mitch's parents are a Japanese woman and a white American man, while Kaz's father is black. When the two boys are seven, the corpse of Miki, another orphan from the same "facility" is discovered, "dressed in an orange skirt, her hair spread around her head," "floating face down on the surface of the pond" near the orphanage "facility."<sup>6</sup> A strong possibility exists that the three children have seen the criminal responsible for her death—that, in fact, it might be the same person they saw trying to push Miki into the pond. But many rumors circulate regarding the criminal, including speculation that he, a victim of the atomic bombing, may have redirected his rage over that onto the American-Japanese orphan Miki. The character Tābo (Tamiya) seems the most distressed by these rumors about the suspect. This is because at the time of the incident, Tābo (a primary school student) was also seen near the pond. As 'repatriates' who were forsaken at war's end by the Chinese people around them, Tābo and his mother had struggled to survive, with no one to help them. Then, at the age of 51 Tābo commits suicide, "hanging himself from a cherry tree in the grounds of the Yanaka municipal cemetery in Taitō Ward, Tokyo."<sup>7</sup> The novel concludes without identifying the actual criminal: it focuses instead on depicting the incident as a 'shared memory' of Japan held among American-Japanese mixed-raced children.

The mixed-race orphans in the 'facility,' particularly those born to African-American soldiers, never manage to find their place within Japanese society. Many end up leaving for America—including Mitch and Kaz. The two drift around the world, seeking a place where they might finally fit in: a boarding school in England, Paris during the rise and fall of the

1968 leftist uprising, a garden at the South Pole where ferns have grown since ancient times, and the Bretagne sea coast where many fisherman are buried, among other places. In America during the Civil Rights movement, Mitch finds himself inspired by the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, but still remains unable to escape the evil spell—the discrimination against mixed-race children—of Japan. Ten years earlier, Kaz had died as a result of injuries suffered when he fell from a tree. After Kaz's death, Mitch continues to curse Japan: "The entire Japanese archipelago should just vanish from the face of the earth, it's the most hateful country on earth."<sup>8</sup> Returning to Japan after the 3/11 earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster, Mitch comes to the conclusion that Kaz could have avoided such a young death if he had left Japan earlier. These expressions of hatred for Japan reveal the presence of deeply conflicted emotional ties to the country. The narrative at this point returns once more to the story of the mixed-race orphan Miki who died in the pond, reaching its conclusion when Mitch and Yonko pay a visit to Tābo's mother, who is completely isolated after her son's death.

In a postscript to the novel, the author quotes from a report by Takemine Seiichirō, suggesting that the title *Wildcat Dome* alludes to the Runit Dome, a massive facility built to store radioactive waste after the decontamination of Runit Island, part of Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands. From 1948 to 1958 the United States conducted nuclear tests there, subjecting its residents to forced evacuations. The residents were finally permitted to return to the island in 1980 and discovered that a number of islands had disappeared as a result of the nuclear tests. The Runit Dome, a concrete facility seven meters high and 110 meters in diameter, was built to house radioactive materials generated through the tests.<sup>9</sup> "The name 'Runit Dome' refers to something inconvenient that society and people don't want to face up to, something

that's been swept under the carpet," Tsushima writes, linking her own novel deftly to issues that Japan has tried to sweep under the carpet—the violence of the early postwar era and the 3/11 Fukushima nuclear disaster.<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Nakamata Akio in the journal *Voice*, Tsushima explained the use of "Wildcat" in the title. "We have often heard about the wildcat, but few people have actually seen this creature. A wildcat is a nocturnal animal, in some ways an 'invisible existence.'" In its 'invisible existence,' it bears a close resemblance to radioactivity.<sup>11</sup>

*Wildcat Dome* confronts head on the postwar history that Japan has tried to avoid facing, perceptively grasping the problem of mixed-race orphans from the postwar American Occupation and the 3/11 Fukushima nuclear disasters as joint products of unholy collusion between two empires, Japanese and American.

Both *Reed Boat, Flying* and *Wildcat Dome* share a characteristic found among Tsushima's previous works: a questioning of the eternal value of 'time' and 'life.' Likewise, the three works presented here—*All Too Barbarian*, *Reed Boat, Flying*, and *Wildcat Dome*—each depict in unflinching detail the violent oppression that the nation-state has inflicted on those who straddle boundaries of nation or race and on those situated on the peripheries of empire. Borrowing the outlines of the Musha Incident uprising by the aboriginal people of Taiwan, *All Too Barbarian* foregrounds the underlying role played by a masculinist 'logos,' while *Reed Boat, Flying* exposes the dark history of the collective massacre carried out through the forced abortions imposed under the rubric of 'illegitimate pregnancies' during postwar repatriation.

Perhaps the most biting ironic scene in *Wildcat Dome* is its depiction of the children in the 'facility' playing war. The children divide up into Japanese and American armies, and two children with dark skins pretend to be black

GIs, bellowing out, “Hey, Jap!, as they chomp in exaggerated fashion on sticks of chewing gum.” The ‘Mama’ of the ‘facility’ subsequently scolds them, saying “How can you be so stupid? Or do you all have a big hole in your heads?”<sup>12</sup> Completely ignorant of the historical reality that their parents were once enemies, trying to kill one another, these children are simply playing a game that repeats the act of war through imitation.

## Conclusion

Tsushima explained the reason for her continued focus on these sorts of children, including the mixed-race orphans of the postwar period: “I believe that if postwar Japanese society had shown more tolerance

and accepted these children, it would have resulted in a much more diverse and open society; at the very least, it would have escaped becoming the sort of inward-facing, xenophobic society it has now become.”<sup>13</sup>

With her interest in those marginalized by society and her richly humanistic vision, Tsushima focused on the peripheries of the empire and as a result created a body of works that attract sympathetic readers not only in Japan, but also in those areas once pushed into the peripheries of empire. Tsushima Yūko’s trilogy explores the after-life of the Japanese empire, highlighting the “light” and the “dark,” the “prewar” and the “postwar” of Japan. The representation of Japan they offer makes these perhaps the most important works of her late period.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Kawamura Minato, ed., *Tsushima Yūko* (Tokyo: Kanae Shobō, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> Katsumata Hiroshi, “Shohyō *Nara repōto* Tsushima Yūko: Furumonogatari no sosei boshi jojō no hishō,” *Bungakukai* 58:12 (December 2004): 348-350.
- <sup>3</sup> See Wu Peichen, “Yuanshi mushishehui de huanxiang: Wu Peichen lun Tsushima Yūko wenxue de yuansheng yuzhou,” *Yinke wenxuezhì* (February, 2011): 32-37.
- <sup>4</sup> Tsushima Yūko, “*Amari ni yaban na ni tsuite*,” in Tarumi Chie *et al*, eds., *Taiwan bunka hyōshō no genzai* (Nagoya: Arumu, 2010), 8-9.
- <sup>5</sup> Tsushima Yūko, “*Watashi no yamaneko tachi*,” *Hon* (June 2013): 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Tsushima Yūko, *Yamaneko dōmu* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2013), 94.
- <sup>7</sup> Tsushima, *Yamaneko dōmu*, 64.
- <sup>8</sup> Tsushima, *Yamaneko dōmu*, 9.
- <sup>9</sup> Tsushima Yūko, *Yamaneko dōmu*, 331.
- <sup>10</sup> See Karube Tadashi’s interview with Tsushima Yūko, “*Kikite Karube Tadashi Yamaneko dōmu: kakusareta ‘sengo’ o tadorinaosu*,” *Gunzō* (July 2013): 182.
- <sup>11</sup> See Nakamata Akio’s interview with Tsushima Yūko, “*Kikite Nakamata Akio Kono chōsha ni aitai: Yamaneko dōmu*,” *Voice* (September 2013): 173.
- <sup>12</sup> Tsushima, *Yamaneko dōmu*, 88.
- <sup>13</sup> Tsushima Yūko, “*Watashi no yamaneko-tachi*,” *Hon* (June, 2013): 9.