



Reconstructing the Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction

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Abstract

In Japanese tradition the individual body was significant because it was tied to the formation of a national identity. Incorporating the physical body with the national had a long lineage in Japan (Slaymaker 12). Wartime propaganda often set the individual body (*nikutai*) in opposition to the national body (*kokutai*). According to Douglas Slaymaker the *kokutai*, with the emperor at the centre, became like a state religion and during the war years it transformed into “a formidable edifice that brooked no dissent”. Postwar Japanese writing was a protest against this taking-over of individual bodies by the state. Some writers saw the *nikutai* as a liberation from the country’s militaristic past. A strong able body was conflated with the ideas of a strong and healthy nation. The wartime ideology demanded that people renounce their individual desires and focus their energies on state projects. When the emperor system that supported the structure of *kokutai* collapsed the individual body was liberated from the constraints of the national polity. The *nikutai* had been denied meaning and existence during the war and prewar years. Postwar writings reflected the need to reclaim the individual body. The postwar body was, however, gendered, sexualised and depended on the body of a woman. The image of the soldier had represented masculine ideals during the wartime but such ideals of aggression were not encouraged by the occupying forces. In postwar literature the men often assert their masculine identity through their bodies vis-a-vis the body of a woman or the foreign body of the American soldier. This paper will analyse two works - Nosaka Akiyuki's *American Hijiki* and Sakaguchi Ango's *The Idiot* - to discuss the representation and construction of the body in postwar Japanese literature.

Keywords

Sakaguchi Ango, Nosaka Akiyuki, body, postwar Japanese literature, *nikutai*, *kokutai*

On 27 September, 1945, Emperor Hirohito and General Douglas MacArthur met for the first time at the American embassy in Tokyo. Three photographs were taken that day. In one the General's eyes were closed and the Emperor's mouth was gaping open. The second, too, was ruined by Hirohito's gaping mouth. The third became the historic photograph that was published (Fig 1). It shows MacArthur looking cool and composed, his hands resting on his waist, his feet slightly apart. Emperor Hirohito, meanwhile, dressed in a Western suit looks uncomfortable, nervous and out of place, almost like a caricature. When the photograph was published the Japanese were shocked to see their godlike Emperor, who until then was hardly seen or heard, overshadowed by the tall American. Ide Magoroku recounted his surprise at seeing the photograph. To the 14-year-old the tall, proud American was a sharp contrast to the disappointing figure of the emperor's "worn-out body wrapped in morning dress" that was an evidence of defeat. At that moment Hirohito went from being a "manifestation of divinity and a symbol of the national and cultural identity" to a mere man. However, to many Japanese Hirohito's unimpressive figure was an embodiment of the sacrifice he had made for Japan.

If people could identify with the emperor as a human being in the postwar period...that identification was facilitated through the myth that the emperor sacrificed himself for the future of his country. The photograph vividly demonstrates what happened to the emperor who supposedly insisted: "I do not care about what may happen to me." The shabbier the image of the emperor in the photo, the easier it was to perceive his sacrifice. Many Japanese transposed their own fate in Japan after the defeat onto this figure of Hirohito. (Igarashi 33)



Fig. 1: Emperor Hirohito (right) and General MacArthur at the US Embassy in Tokyo on 27 September, 1945. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Power relations between Japan and the US were sexualised through the bodies of MacArthur and Hirohito. The “feminised” body of the emperor was seen as the feminisation of the nation itself. The picture also forwarded the foundational narrative of a “happy union” between the two countries prompting Douglas Lummis to call it their “wedding photo” (Igarashi 31). The gendered power relations evident in the photograph were replicated in the political relations between the two countries. Japan’s subjugation to US hegemony cast the nation in a feminised role, while the US that “rescued” Japan from the clutches of evil militarists was seen as masculine. In postwar writings the male bodies of American GI’s is often in contrast to the bodies of Japanese men. In *American Hijiki* young Toshio is surprised at the magnificent builds of the American soldiers with “arms like roof beams and hips like millstones”. The young boy realises that though he is a beginner in the Martial Arts Society and can defend himself against the school’s “biggest lugs” he can do nothing to the American soldiers: “What a magnificent build they had! No wonder Japan lost the war...If you went after these guys with the wooden rifles we used in bayonet drill, they’d snap in two” (Nosaka 444). To Toshio the American male bodies seem superior and become the reason for Japan’s humiliation.

The emperor was at the heart of Japanese wartime indoctrination that encouraged loyalty, self-sacrifice and honourable death. Sacrificing oneself for the emperor was used to promote Japanese racial supremacy and the unique status of the emperor and the nation. The American restraint against Hirohito was because “the Japanese regarded their sovereign with religious awe and would be even more inclined to fight to the death if he were attacked” (Dower, 281). Stripping the emperor of his divinity and reducing him to a mortal man liberated the individual body from the constraints of the national polity, or *kokutai*. In the 1930s *kokutai*, the concept of the nation as a body centred in the actual body of the emperor came to represent Japanese uniqueness, the essence of what it meant to be Japanese. Japan has a long history of reconfiguring individual bodies (*nikutai*) with the national body (*kokutai*). Throughout the ages the Japanese had believed that they belonged not only to their families and other kinship but to “one invisible National Community” (Kitagawa 211). In its modern usage *kokutai* was synonymous with the government and was “established vis-a-vis and opposed to the individual body” (Slaymaker 12). The wartime ideology demanded that people renounce their individual desires and focus their energies on state projects. They had to be dedicated to the nation’s war efforts. This loss of the individual was reiterated in war slogans like ‘Deny the self, serve the public’.

Wartime regulations sought to create healthy subjects by monitoring and improving the Japanese body. A healthy and strong nation was increasingly linked to the health of individuals. The National Physical Strength Law and the National Eugenic Law of 1940 placed the Japanese bodies under strict state regulations. The former required all men aged 17 to 20 undergo physical examinations. If found to have problems they were required to undergo training or medical treatment. The eugenics law, meanwhile, limited compulsory sterilisation to prevent and cleanse the population of genetic defects, disabilities and illnesses to ensure “genetically superior stock”. These state measures were not only disciplinary but also, what Michel Foucault calls, regulatory. Discipline is applied on an individual body but regulatory power is enforced on the population, the

masses. This new regulatory power or biopower dealt with “a new body, a multiple body” (Foucault 245). Biopower functions by “taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and by ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularised” (246-47). It was not enough that the state train the bodies but also the minds of its subjects. A popular wartime state measure was radio gymnastics. It ensured that the entire population was practising identical moves while listening to the same tunes and following the same orders (Manzenreiter 73). This mimicking of physical movements created a uniform mass of individuals. The individual body was replaced by a general mass. It is this loss of individuality that postwar Japanese literature addresses through the central theme of the body. In Japan disciplinary and regulatory powers worked in tandem to produce docile bodies willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation. Japanese wartime regulations sought to discipline individual bodies to create a strong and healthy nation.

The body became a central concern in postwar Japan for two reasons. It resulted, at least partly, from the demands of everyday bodily needs. The war was over but people were still struggling to find food and shelter. Major Japanese cities had been completely destroyed in the American firebombings disrupting food distribution. By the end of 1945 the country was almost out of rice and thousands had starved to death. Daily existence had become so precarious that a report suggested people supplement their starch intake by introducing acorns, grain husks, peanut shells, and sawdust in their diet, while silkworm cocoons, grasshoppers, rats or a powder made by drying the blood of cows, horses, and pigs could be used as a protein supplement (Dower 91).

The second reason for this “obsession with the body”, according to Douglas Slaymaker, was partly a “response to the wartime censorship” which prohibited writing of the erotic, the political and wartime deprivations (3). The *nikutai* had been denied meaning and existence during the war and prewar years. Postwar writings reflected the need to reclaim the body that had been integrated into the *kokutai*. Slaymaker studies three writers - Tamura Taijirō, Noma Hiroshi, and Sakaguchi Ango - he calls “flesh writers” to explain the emergence of the “literature of the body” in postwar Japan. These writers attributed the mistakes of the past to “undervaluation of the body” by the militarist state. To overcome the past proper respect for the individual body had to be re-established. To offset the militarist past and to avoid another lapse into militarism they suggested emphasis on the physical (Slaymaker 2). Tamura had asserted his distrust in “thought” that was “draped in the authoritarian robes of a despotic government”. The body, he said, was rising in opposition to this thought:

We now believe in nothing but our own bodies. Only the body is real. The body’s weariness, the body’s desires, the body’s anger, the body’s intoxications, the body’s confusion, the body’s fatigue – only these are real. It is because of all these things that we realise, for the first time, that we are alive. (qtd in Slaymaker, 3)

But it was not just the flesh writers who were writing of the liberation of the body. Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima and Akiyuki Nosaka have, in their works, explored the possibility of freedom - from old age, a humiliating past or an inferior body - in the physical and the carnal. This paper will look at two works, Nosaka’s *American Hijiki* and Ango’s *The Idiot*, to understand the reclaiming of the individual body in postwar Japan.

Self-Sacrifice, Emperor Worship and the Annihilation of the Body

The wartime regime had created a uniform and docile body. Postwar writers were suggesting “alternative constructions of society” and the body through the carnal. Their idea of the body was, however, gendered, sexualised and depended on the body of a woman. The image of the soldier had represented masculine ideals during the wartime but such ideals of aggression were not encouraged by the American occupying forces. Though liberated from their militarist state, Japan was immediately under US Occupation. In fact, John Dower argues that for Japan the Pacific war did not end until 1952, with the end of the occupation (26). The sexualised US-Japan ties had already cast Japan in a feminine role and destabilised male roles in Japanese society. Power was now located in foreign men. Japanese men were not free to openly explore their masculinity in public spaces; hence, they sought liberation in and through women’s bodies. In postwar literature the body of a woman becomes a paradise or a womb-like space where the men seek freedom. Before the American troops were to land in Japan the Home ministry had ordered the setting up of prostitution establishments to preserve the “purity” of the Japanese race. They were afraid the invading men would rape their women the same way their own troops had defiled the women in Manchuria and other colonies. They perceived the biggest threat as threat to the body, particularly a woman’s body.

The male body in wartime Japan had become a symbol of “self-denial, a self-abnegatory offering, a sacrifice to the living deity” (Mangan, Komagome 191). Sacrificing one’s life for the emperor was the “sacred duty” of all but especially of Japanese men and boys. The brave military heroes were male icons and their virtues were to be inculcated in the young men of Japan. Stories of valour in the battlefield were extolled and deaths glorified. The story of the “three human bullets” created a new kind of heroism unlike anything seen in earlier ages¹. Self-sacrifice was not a new concept in Japan. General Nogi’s ritual suicide by seppuku on the day of Emperor Meiji’s funeral had stirred the nation in 1912². However, in the late 1930s self-sacrifice wasn’t enough anymore. “Individualistic heroism” was insufficient in the face of total war. Instead, “it demanded soldiers who willingly sacrificed themselves collectively on the orders of the commander” (188). Nogi’s suicide was a demonstration of “elite individualistic heroism” which in modern warfare proved to be an obstacle. The three brave soldiers, however, were low-ranking privates and represented not the elite but the masses. It was for this very reason that their story found widespread resonance among the population. Heroism, a masculine trait, was exemplified through sacrifice and death in the name of the emperor.

¹ In 1932 during the Japanese assault in Shanghai three soldiers, strapped with explosives, breached a barbed wire fence and were killed in the process. The suicide bombing paved the way for the Japanese army to advance and route the Chinese. The story of the three brave soldiers caught the fancy of the Japanese media, filmmakers and writers. Songs and plays were written about their bravery. It also inspired a range of themed goods from “three human bullets sake” to “three human bullets bean paste candy”. (From *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* by Louise Young).

² On 13 September, 1912 as Emperor Meiji’s funeral procession was underway, General Maresuke Nogi and his wife bathed, changed into white kimonos and sat facing the emperor’s portrait. Mrs Nogi plunged a dagger into her heart and the general disembowelled himself with his sword. In a death poem Gen. Nogi had left behind he said he was following his lord into death in a practice known as *junshi*. Nogi’s loyalty to the emperor was enshrined as the highest embodiment of virtue.

Self-sacrifice always entailed the annihilation of the physical body. The price of heroism and emperor-worship, ultimately, led to the destruction of the body.

Morris Low argues that Japanese men embraced the samurai cultural model as part of a national ideology centred around the emperor (81). Japanese masculinity, therefore, was closely tied to the emperor system. Low writes: “The notion of proximity to the Emperor’s body, and the idea that Japanese soldiers were his sons, facilitated the disciplining of soldiers’ bodies and the regulation of their lives.” (82) When the *kokutai* collapsed the Japanese men’s sense of maleness, too, suffered a serious blow. The *nikutai* was liberated from the constraints of the national polity. The body in wartime Japan had predominantly been masculine but once the structure that supported it collapsed the body had to be reconstructed.

Many postwar writers turned to the carnal and erotic in their search for liberation from the state-regulated body. By celebrating the body they wanted to remove themselves from the state’s control. The carnal sexual body was reimagined as a place from which to “reconstitute and rediscover the individual (and the masculine) destroyed during the war” (Slaymaker 18). However, the Occupation forces prohibited displays of aggressive traits that were traditionally considered male. In postwar literature the men often assert their masculine identity through their bodies vis-a-vis the body of a woman or the foreign body of the American soldier. For writers like Nosaka Akiyuki and Sakaguchi Ango the body becomes a site of redemption from and reconstruction of the past.

Nosaka Akiyuki: *American Hijiki* and the “Great American Allergy”

In *American Hijiki* Akiyuki contemplates complex ideas about memory and encountering the past. The protagonist Toshio is haunted by a sudden wave of repressed memories of humiliation and deprivation triggered by the visit of his wife’s American acquaintances. The narrative weaves between Toshio’s flashbacks of the Occupation - his encounters with the GIs, “pimping” young “aspiring whores” to the homesick Americans, everyday battle against hunger and starvation - and the present day. Toshio’s relationship with Mr Higgins proves to be an extension of the post-1945 US-Japan ties. Toshio’s attempts to please the American turns frantic and Mr Higgins’ history as a GI in Occupied Japan only seems to spur him on to try even harder. Toshio himself cannot comprehend his actions:

He (Higgins) comes from the country that killed my father, but I don’t resent him at all. Far from it, I feel nostalgically close to him. What am I doing when I buy him drinks and women? Trying to cancel out a fourteen-year-old’s terror at the sight of those huge Occupation soldiers? (464)

In Toshio’s mind the image of the “huge” soldier represents the American man and this image has been informed by the GIs he encountered after the war. The American-Japanese relationship was a strange phenomenon that defied the binary of victor and vanquished. John Dower writes of the Americans being welcomed by women who called out “yoo hoo” and men who “bowed and asked what it was the conquerors wished” (24). The Americans, he says, were “seduced” by the polite and gentle-mannered Japanese who were sick of the war and wanted to not just forget the past but transcend it. The foreigners were the enemy and also their saviour who had rescued them from the militarists. Toshio

has been told that Japan lost the war because the Japanese were physically inferior to the Americans: “Look at the Americans. Their average height is five feet ten inches. For us, it’s only five foot three. This difference of seven inches figures in everything, and I believe that’s why we lost the war,” a teacher tells Toshio. To the young boy his own countrymen with their “monkey faces” begging for “shigaretto, chocoreto” (cigarettes, chocolate) are a sad figure in front of the Americans. Even a shabby foreigner’s face has a sheen of “civilization” that makes him a “shining star” in front of the Japanese. Toshio remarks: “Look at those muscular arms, the massive chest. How can you not feel ashamed next to him?” This sense of shame is deeply rooted in the physical differences that Toshio perceives between the Japanese and the foreigners and it still lingers in Toshio. Desperate to impress Higgins Toshio resorts ultimately to his former pimp-like ways, taking Higgins to bars, buying women and finally arranging a sex show with the famous Yoshi-chan, the “pride of Japan” who has the “numbah one penis”. But Yoshi-chan is struck impotent and is unable to perform in front of the foreign man. His impotence arises from his postwar experience, triggered by the presence of Higgins. In Yoshi-chan’s impotence Toshio imagines the impotence of his entire race. The narrative that Hirohito and MacArthur’s photograph represented continues in the present.

In *American Hijiki* Tokyo and by extension Japan exist as a prostitute that Toshio, as pimp, must promote and sell to his “client”, Higgins (Hillenbrand 149). The city becomes an exotic space, a male space of hostess bars, sex shows and inhabited by call girls and prostitutes. While Toshio’s wife and Mrs Higgins visit the Kabuki theatre and the beauty parlour, the men try to out-drink and out-whore each other in the modern spaces of night-time Tokyo. Toshio finds himself regressing back to his pimp persona: talking in “strict GI-whore style”, purchasing only the best “goods” for his client. In Toshio’s imagination Japan’s economic progress is measured by the quality of prostitutes he can purchase for Higgins. The live sex show is to prove to Higgins that Japan is no longer the destitute and feminised nation that the Americans left behind. Toshio seeks to bring Higgins to his knees:

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. (466)

Akiyuki’s experiences during the war and the Occupation deeply influenced his writings, hence, in his work the American exists as an ‘Other’ to be overcome and transcended. In *American Hijiki* Toshio’s identity depends on and is influenced by the body of this masculine Other. But in the end we realise that for children of the Occupation, like Toshio and Yoshi-chan, the past cannot be easily wished away. Their inferiority complex in front of the Americans is a mindset that “resists reprogramming” (Hillenbrand 151).

Sakaguchi Ango: Body and Decadence

In answer to German architect Bruno Taut’s praise for traditional Japanese culture and architecture, Japanese landscape gardens and tearooms, Sakaguchi Ango wrote: “I

couldn't care less if both the Horyuji and the Byodoin³ burned to the ground. If the need should arise, we'd do well to tear down Horyuji and put in a parking lot" (*A Personal View of Japanese Culture* 445). For Ango the only thing that matters is "the necessities of life" and temples and shrines do nothing to support people's day-to-day lives. These structures are built to support an ideology or to express a lifestyle which is opposed to the worldly and the profane. The most distinguishing feature of a temple is that it is not designed to be a home thereby eliminating all allusions to everyday life. Ango found beauty in a prison building, a dry-ice factory and a destroyer for the very same reason that these buildings existed out of necessity. To live sincerely a life rooted in desire is the essence of his philosophy of decadence:

I yearn for those who lived true to their desires, the common man living a common life without apology, the petty man living a petty life with no regrets. (*A Personal View* 444)

The ideology of wartime Japan was idealised by kamikaze pilots and widows but once the war was over and the routine of everyday life kicked in the heroes became black-marketers and the widows found new men. Postwar decadence, the loss of traditional values, signalled the return of the human and reflected man's truest and basic drive for survival. In Ango's philosophy of decadence the individual responds not to any ideology but to the physical needs of day-to-day life. The body, then, becomes a central theme in Ango's writings. This bodily identity is not based on the foreign masculine 'Other' as in Akiyuki's works but on the rigours of daily existence. As long as people's day-to-day lives was healthy Japanese culture and traditions was healthy (*A Personal View* 446).

In *The Idiot* (1946) Ango draws a striking picture of wartime Japan that is already sliding towards decadence. Izawa's neighbourhood is inhabited by promiscuous women: prostitutes, the "wartime wife", mistresses and girlfriends of government officials. The men were no better. There was a soldier who fought in Manchuria and boasted that his profession was murder, a man who belonged to "one of the traditional schools that practiced the fine art of picking pockets" and a naval sub-lieutenant who feasted on fish, tinned food and sake every day. Ango's characters live in a world dictated by the carnal, where the ideals of spirit and *kokutai* have become a sham. One of the women has had sexual relations with all officials of her neighbourhood association and become pregnant. No one knows who the father is. Neighbourhood associations were de facto surveillance systems that oversaw all activities in the neighbourhood from food rationing to air raid drills. Ango points to the hypocrisy of a wartime spirit in which a system set up by the state to help civilians is complicit in carnal transgressions (Slaymaker 115). People's daily lives are dedicated to the concerns of the flesh. The nation's defeat and annihilation of the Japanese is imminent and yet Izawa can only agonise over his meagre salary of two hundred yen. When he holds his paycheck he is overcome with joy for having survived

³ Byōdō-in in Uji, Kyoto Prefecture, originally built as a villa for a high-ranking minister during the Heian period in 998 was turned into a Buddhist temple in 1052. It is one of the World Heritage sites of Japan and has a long history of over a thousand years. Hōryū-ji or the Temple of the Flourishing Law is a Buddhist temple in Japan's Nara Prefecture. It was once one of the powerful Seven Great Temples. The Hōryū-ji's pagoda is the oldest wooden building existing in the world. In 1993 it was made a UNESCO World Heritage site.

another month. A postwar world where he survives is a remote fancy, a “world of dreams”. His reality is haunted by the trivial two hundred yen that “blocked off everything else and swept away all hope from his life” (*The Idiot* 387). The curse of this triviality will follow him and his wife and child when he gets married. He finds an escape in “the idiot”, a woman with absolutely no thought, who is nothing but body and lust.

The nameless idiot woman hides in Izawa’s closet during the day and shares his bed at night. Her mind is a void and she is no more than a waiting body but this body is not human. Her ugliness is exposed at a crucial moment in the story when Izawa and the idiot are hiding in the closet during an air raid. People with intellect, even children, retain their control and resistance even at the worst times but this woman with no thought and restraint writhes in anguish and fear in the face of death. To Izawa her ugly movement resembles the writhing of a caterpillar. In her ugliness Izawa becomes conscious of his own form and body. He realises that he is a “cowardly and vulgar man” who lacks the courage to kill the woman. Only when she is trying to save herself from the raging flames, dipping her body in filthy water does the woman transform into a “new and lovable woman”. But once away from the grasp of death she again becomes a “mere lump of flesh”. In the end Izawa finds no escape from a future that looks increasingly hopeless. In Ango’s fiction the woman promises liberation with her sexuality and physicality but it turns out to be an illusion and there is no salvation.

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