

Natsume Soseki 夏目漱石. *Ten Nights of Dreams* 『夢十夜』 (*Yume ju ya*). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986. 187 Pp. Translated by Takumi Kashima and Loretta R. Lorenz. 78 Pp. Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2000.

Soseki's set of short stories *Ten Nights' Dreams* (*Yume ju ya*, 1908) is often viewed as a metaphorical representation of the late Meiji period, which was a time of big changes in Japan on many various levels. While being a beginning of a new chapter of success story, it is also characterized by a certain amount of anxiety, isolation and identity crisis. Soseki, as it seems, was very aware of these downsides of the new period and tried to reflect them in his books.

The relevance of the presented work is due to the cultural and literary situation in the twentieth century, when the problem of intercultural dialog, finding the new forms of expression of fears and dreams toward otherness along with the distinct processes of artistic experimentation became extremely important. Representations of a certain country imply such intricate issues as a relationship between 'self' and 'otherness'. Cross-cultural dialogue introduced in Soseki's *Ten Nights' Dreams* highlights a unique phenomenon: Japan itself appears, as the Other due to the historical and cultural situation of the Meiji period with its processes of modernization and westernization, when premodern Japan changed completely and modern Japan was perceived as something new and even alien. On the other hand, premodern Japan is often mystified and referred to as something exotic.

Soseki in his work raises a number of important questions: construction, mystification, and demythologization of the images of new Japan, which allows identifying a number of constant assertions about Japaneseness that circulate in Japanese literature. As it was pointed out, "both internally and externally, images of Japan seem destined to be flavored with fantastic associations. They range from the image of Japan as a Utopian world, in which modernity actually works, to the forbidding image of Japan as dystopian high-tech nightmare."¹ In Soseki's work, it is certainly a nightmare where the high pace of modernization can cause only madness and constant sense of anxiety. The use of premodern images is supposed to give comfort and relief as something nostalgic but they hardly succeed in it.

Soseki's *Ten Nights' Dreams* present the idea of multifaceted Japan which can be seen in various mythological and folkloric contexts, represented in such images as transformation of a woman into the flower, blind priest Aobōzu, karma concepts, Amanojaku (a wicked deity of a Japanese folklore), prayer to Hachiman (another deity from Shintō), the mistress of pigs etc. Soseki's work also depicts some features of modern Japan such as allusions to Russo-Japanese War, a journey to the West, which implies autobiographical motives (Soseki's own journey to England) etc. All these topics underscore the sense of uncertainty in the unknowable and changing world, which appears to be new Japan of the 20th century.

Soseki's set of stories can be viewed as a work that announced the beginning of the modernization of Japanese prose. Each 'night' introduces a new theme, a new experience, a new vision of modern Japan, which is built around ambiguous representations of changes in Japanese society during Meiji period along with

¹ S. J. Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1996. p. 252.

conflicting recollections of the previous epoch. In “Dreams”, the author depicted his concerns about Japan too quickly internalizing European culture, too quickly refusing its own historical and cultural heritage. Here Soseki ponders over the fact what it means to be Japanese in a “new-brand world” where traditional values are no longer valid. What does Soseki in his work is that he challenges the common belief of the positive consequences of modernity, forming specific fantastic view (and vision) of Japan, which is associated with a very different world, the one of the past, the lost one.

In *Ten Nights' Dreams*, the image of Japan appears to be constructed on the verge of two Japanese worlds – premodern and modern. Premodern images are encoded in realities of Japanese past (mostly, of Edo period), references to myths or embodied in women images. Representations of modern Japan are mostly critical, ironic, and encoded in different unpleasant metaphors, autobiographical at times. Being horrified and suppressed by modernization Soseki's protagonist tries to escape from the reality of a rapidly changing world around him through dreams, death or the discovery of a woman linked to a non-modern world. The association of women with the past and death is an important one in most of the fantasies of the time mentioned. Frequently it is a woman, who has supernatural control over life, death, and the connection with the past. In Soseki's work, in the First dream woman dies and incarnates into the flower, in the Fifth she just dies, in the Ninth she prays for her husband's life (in vain) and in the Tenth, she kills. It seems that women in his fiction are often associated with a sense of loss, but also they often help to cope with the sense of loss and even try to escape it. However, it is hard to claim that Soseki considered escape at all possible.

If woman embodies the past, then in Soseki's Fifth dream this past is doomed. The woman, who rides to say farewell to her man dies because of *Amanojaku*, the echo-spirit, who can imitate the voices of all living things. It can hardly be a coincidence that Soseki appalled by Japan imitating West uses the echo-master as an evil hero, who becomes the reason for the woman's death (the death of Japanese past). Apart from women images as metaphoric representations of Japanese past, Soseki draws attention to the figure of a child (specifically in the Third dream).

The most fascinating, haunting and enigmatic, the Third dream pictures the protagonist carrying a monstrous child on his back. This child can be understood both as unresolved Japanese past and as modern Japan of Meiji period, blind and disabled. In his outstanding lecture on the development of modern Japan² Soseki points out that, Japan now resembles a child carried by an adult who goes in an unknown direction. We can only assume whether by the adult Soseki meant west. The figure of a child in here is rather ambiguous for it is both vulnerable and threatening at the same time.

If premodern Japan (or Japanese past) as a woman is rather attractive and desirable in Soseki's work, the child symbolizes past that is both alien and frightening. Interestingly enough, the protagonist thinks of this child not only as past but also future and present and finds himself caught up in a feeling of claustrophobia. This sense of the self, alienated from its past, present and future, forced into various manifestations, but all largely negative, runs through *Ten Nights' Dreams*. Therefore,

² “Enlightenment of Modern Japan” (Gendai Nihon no Kaika), Nov. 1911. *Asahi Newspaper*.

these dreams are nightmares where the reality of modern Japan is “frighteningly meaningless or, even worse, threateningly meaningful.”³ The conflict between past and modernity can be found in the Sixth dream. In this dream, the protagonist watches the work of an ancient master Unkei who carves his “guardian gods” or ‘temple guardians’ (“*nio*”) from wood and then tries to repeat the masterpiece and to make a statue himself. He fails. Guardian gods, as the protagonist presumes, do not reside in Meiji-period. Soseki problematizes the question of Japanese identity in a new age where the “guardian gods” exist no more. The protagonist carves into logs to find Japanese past and to escape the reality. However, new Japan in Soseki’s work reveals the inability to provide safety and ways of escape.

Modern representations of Japan are mostly shown in dreams of the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th nights. If in the Sixth dream the protagonist reluctantly accepts living in a modern world, the protagonist of the Seventh dream finds it difficult to adjust himself to the new reality, which comes from the West, and chooses to escape through death. This dream calls attention to the existential problems of the human being. The protagonist is on board an extraordinarily big ship, which can be seen as another metaphoric representation of modern Japan.

Implying that the ship is heading westwards (where we can also see Soseki’s own journey to England), the writer expresses his concerns toward westernization and modernization and in a veiled form asks if Japan should go in this (west) direction. The Seventh dream shows the Japanese (the protagonist) who is completely lost, who does not feel like sailing this ship (this metaphoric new Japan). However, the only way to get off it for him is through death. The sense of modern Japan being completely different from premodern Japan can be seen here. References to the modern Japanese history manifest themselves in the Ninth dream. Japan again appears as disturbing and dark where “The world has somehow become unsettled.”⁴ This sets up a world in turmoil, in transition, in change—the world of Meiji period. The world he is describing is the representative of his own transition from the traditional to the new. The last, Tenth dream turns starts as a fairy tale, where the young man meets a woman who asks her to carry her basket for her.

At some point, when they reach the mountains it all turns into a nightmare—the woman commands her numerous pigs to eat him, which reminds such western female archetype as Circe from Ulysses who turned sailors into pigs. Thus, the dream proclaims the inability to escape the nightmare, the inability “to wake up” from the new reality, and the only exit from it is through death. Thus, Japan given in Soseki’s work appears to be the abandoned world of modern transformations in which the past is intentionally forgotten but occasionally visible in dreams. The protagonist, who watches all the dreams, therefore is caught between contradictory desires to continue living in this new world of modern Japan as it is shown in the 6th night or jump off the ship that is heading west as it is shown in the 7th night.

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³ Napier, S. J. *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literatur*, p. 252.

⁴ Natsume Soseki, *Ten Nights’ Dreams (Yume ju ya)*, Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2000.

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