

## BOOK REVIEW

---

### DECONSTRUCTING COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AS A TOOL OF AMERICAN IMPERIALIST DOMINATION

Reviewed by Victor R. Fumar

---

*"Precisely what is unique is what is universal."*

Takayuki Yokota-Murakami

In a country directly tutored by American colonizers whose hegemonic control over its economic, political, and cultural spheres persists as palpable as sunlight, Takayuki Yokota-Murakami's outstanding book, **Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature** throws light at the shadowy edges of literary studies. Considering the magnitude upon which Philippine education has relied on the Americans for more than a century, this book will certainly find itself difficult to shaken the institutions upon which American imperialist domination in the Philippines has built. Because to declare in all sundry that comparative literature is nothing but an imperialist tool of the Americans to marginalize other cultures and advance the hegemony of the West also means a declaration of war against Filipino academics and educational institutions who valorize and privilege comparative literature as a discipline, let alone identify themselves as brown Americans. (There's the rub, following the author's argument, to say brown American is to marginalize the "brown" and privilege "American"!)

The Japanese author is associate Professor in the Department of Russian, Faculty of Language Culture, at Osaka University, and his book belongs to the State University of New York (SUNY) series called The Margins of Literature. Divided into five chapters, the book wisely used a carefully incisive induction to arrive at its thesis by

transporting the readers back to the pre-modern Japan particularly Edo samurai society and the Meiji Period. Along the way, Yokota-Murakami methodically dissects literary heroes and characters, dispassionately uncovers word origins and etymologies, adeptly summons literary theorists and critics to his side, and brilliantly argues for his case. The result is a brave, candid, stimulating work, monumental in its assertions, if not controversial, which deserves the full attention of all who value literary studies or literature in general.

The author starts by problematizing comparative literature as a discourse of identification. Here, he starts demolishing the early forms of European **comparative literature**. He then engages the readers through a lengthy lecture on the divergence between two schools of comparative literature, with the French represented by Rene Entiembles's *The Crisis in Comparative Literature* (1966) and American as represented by Claudio Guillen's *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (1993). In this chapter, he exposes the futility of comparing the European Don Juans and his Japanese counterparts, Hiraku Genji (*The Tale of the Genji*), Narihira (*The Tales of Ise*), and Yonosuke (*The Life of an Amorous Man*). In particular, he questions and dumps Oshima Tadashi's *A Study of Don Juan Types* (1966) and *Invitation to Spanish Literature* (1978). He then expalicates his contention that there is no basis for comparing Don Juan and Yonosuke, and Oshima's assertions are absurd, if not futile:

*"Oshima begins with an ostensible and meaningful similarity of the Don Juan phenomena in the West and the East, and then concludes that they differ significantly. But if the two are completely different, the ground for comparing collapses, and if the two are almost identical, why do we bother to compare? What do we learn from it? Comparison on an international scale is always such an operation, a tightrope walk which sways between identity, elementary and essential, on the one hand, and difference, contingent and marginal, on the other. A comparatist gains nothing by reaching either end of the rope."*(15)

Yokota-Murakami also traces the introduction of the concept of

“love” into modern Japan, resulting in the coinage of the Japanese term **ren'ai**, consequently bringing along the new concepts of romantic love and humanitarianism. Not unlike the culturally rich T'boli people of southern Philippines who have no term for “art” in their native tongue, the Japanese language, accordingly, had no corresponding **signifier** for “love” such that the Meiji translators of European novels had to invent a word for it.

*“When the ‘modern’ Japanese literati started to read European literature in the early years of the Meiji period (1868-1912), among the most conspicuous features that radically challenged their traditional paradigm was the representation of heterosexual relationships. For instance, the ‘equality’ between male and female lovers or spouses described in Western literary discourse was often quite incomprehensible to Meiji intellectuals.” (36)*

Cited in particular was the difficulty in translating Turgenev's *Father and Sons*.

*“If the premodern regime of Japanese male sexuality, which mostly encompassed prostitution, entailed condescending patronage on the part of a man and humble servitude on that of a woman, love as friendship required mutual respect. Concern for love and respect had, apparently, never been concurrently expressed in premodern Japanese texts. One's object of passion was someone whom one hoped to become intimate with, but not someone wished to admire and respect. Only through reading European literature did a connotation of ‘respect’ are within the significative system of ‘love’ of Japanese literati.” (37)*

Yokota-Murakami argues that such model of male-female relationship which found its way into the writings of Meiji enlightenment thinkers was in complete contradiction to the hierarchical gender structure and the hedonistic masculine sexuality of the premodern Edo upper- and middle class society.

*“The semifeudal (male) system of passion depended on the division between prostitutes (yujo) as objects of love, and housewives (or, literally “ordinary women”; jionna) as domestic servants and agents of reproduction. A wife of Edo culture was*

*seldom conceived as an object of passion; one's own wife almost never." (40)*

The Japanese scholar then makes a distinction of Don Juan types from the perspectives of both the French and American comparativists: Entiembles' "a man who loves" and Guillen's "a man who seduces." Both definitions, do not fit the Japanese Don Juan or more precisely the *koshoku* which changed its denotation and connotation and has been reduced to the "lustful." Here, the author notes the introduction of the paradigm of spiritual love, the goal of purifying one's sexual desire into chaste love was for the first time, recognized and valorized in Japan, thanks to the Christian-oriented romantic conception of love which matched the Tokugawa period's Buddhist ideology which theorized that sexual involvement was "an ephemeral pleasure and a categorical obstacle to religious enlightenment." (98)

Takayuki Yokota-Murakami further asserts rather lengthily that Japanese sexuality is a Western historical construct. Taking from the John Searle's linguistic dichotomy of "brute fact" and "institutional fact", Yokota-Murakami dramatizes how towards the end of the Tokugawa regime and at the beginning of the Meiji period mixed bathing in public baths and the practice of taking a bath in a tub placed outside individual houses have embarrassed foreign visitors "who saw it as a lack of civilization, morality and spirituality." (125). He argues that the emergence of bathhouses with segregated chambers and tubs resulted in promoting the consciousness that nudity was sexually charged. "If the act of peeping was meaningless when nudity was omnipresent, a naked body became worthy of attention with the setting up of partitions to screen it." (130).

Soon after, the narrative mode of authorial confession catches on. "What is sexual thus emerges exactly as something that is private, that which has to be concealed and, therefore, to be revealed." (132). He then laments that when such a paradigm of sexuality was introduced to Meiji Japan, **koshuko** became lust, **iro-otoko** became a libertine, and a mixed bathing became "promiscuous bathing". Peeping in public baths and at naked women became a crime, and hence a lure only then. Female nudity (in public baths) became a potential trigger for a crime. (39). He then

summarizes his point that "sexuality" is a historical construct such that Don Juan becomes a sexual pervert by virtue of the dichotomy of spiritual love and carnal desire.

Dovetailing the book turns a bright spotlight on the shadowy politics of comparative literature. Here, the author glows in his assertion that the humanist belief in a universal essence of human nature has encouraged transcivilizational comparisons. He notes that the preference for the universal seems to be the acknowledged choice of value in the modern academic disciplines. This judgment, accordingly, is endorsed that the universal is represented by a higher civilization. Moreover, he notes the cultural imperialist formulation of "humanity" in which whatever fits the French (Western) paradigm will be regarded as part of "human nature." Whatever does not will be dismissed silently and hastily as inhuman (168).

He declares that within the confines of (American) comparative scholarship, there has been a constant effort to find universalist, ultimate meanings. However, the attempt to locate a central meaning is inevitably accompanied by an act of declaring all other meanings marginal. (172). In other words, the "heart of transcivilizational comparativism is a will to subsume and assimilate other cultural systems."

To prove this point, he traces the rise of comparative literature as coinciding with the Marshall Plan, a policy which according to him, predicated on the restoration and domination of Western civilization in the same manner that American comparativism was also an effort to solidify the hegemony of European culture.