

“Crime of Han”: A Modern Japanese Fiction for a New Aesthetics

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Abstract In the short fiction “Crime of Han,” the author Shiga Naoya develops an ethical thought apparently similar to Nietzsche’s that goes “beyond good and evil.” Through a story of a man who kills his wife in order to find his “true” self, the author tries to show us the importance of the body that makes part of Nature. This thought of his can be interpreted as a modern and individualized version of the ancient world vision of the Japanese, but it is also a new ethics that goes beyond social moral.

Key words true self; Nietzsche; social moral

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I

In this article, I will focus on a modern Japanese short fiction titled “Crime of Han”(1913).¹ Its author Shiga Naoya(1883-1971) has been considered in Japan as one of the biggest writers because of his extremely concise style and unusual descriptive ability. He is one of those writers who left a deep influence on modern Japanese literature. Some lovers of his works used to call him “a godlike writer.”²

Unfortunately, his literature has hardly been known out of Japan even if some of his works are translated in Western languages. The novel I will treat here for example has its English and other versions,³ but there is hardly any repercussion about it on the part of the non-Japanese readers. In this article, I will try to show the importance of the work especially from an ethical point of view.

Shiga’s writings are generally considered as non-philosophical, as they are

composed of such a concrete language that hardly anybody considers them as philosophical. But there is no reason for us not to consider him as a thinker who used a concrete language to express his philosophy. Some of Shiga’s short stories are highly philosophical. The small piece titled “At Kinosaki”(1917), for example, is an excellent verbalization of a series of reflection he made on life and death.

II

To discuss Shiga’s philosophy, we need to consider the historical and cultural context in which he was born and bred. Like many young Japanese of his time, his mind was split between Confucian values, heritage of the previous times, and the new ones that entered from the West. Taught to respect their parents and their superiors, to revere the Emperor in a Confucian way, he was baptized at the same time with the new philosophy coming from the West consisting in respect for the individuality of each person. As such, his soul was in ethical conflicts.

His encounter with Protestantism helped him be free from Confucian values.⁴ But the Western religion he knew had a negative aspect because it oppressed the traditional value he had at the bottom of his heart. Here the traditional value means a naturalistic value, according to which any behavior loyal to Nature is good. Not only Confucianism but also Protestantism condemned such a thought as sinful, but Shiga held it as an unconscious source of his self.

When he felt Protestantism too oppressive, he looked for an outlet from it, and found the outlet in Nietzsche’s philosophy. In his diary of April the 25th in 1911, he wrote as follows:

I read Nietzsche a little bit. His words are interesting. I was going to underline some of them, but finally, I didn’t because I saw them already in myself and that I could say the same as my thought. This may be because of the time I live in. His thought might have entered in me unnoticed by way of my surroundings. (Shiga, 10-511)⁵

We cannot tell to what degree he really understood Nietzsche because he did not mention a word about it. However, comparing his thought and the German philosopher’s, I suppose that it was Nietzsche’s notion of “will to power” and criticism of the social moral impregnated with Christianity that he found a sort of affinity with himself. The following words of Zarathustra, for example, must have pleased him: “There is more reason in your body than in your essence of wisdom”(Thus Spoke Zarathustra, *The Despisers of the Body*)(Nietzsche 101).⁶

The affinity between Nietzsche's ethics and Shiga's ideas as evidenced in his works provoked a criticism against him. Some critics blamed him as "egoistic" and even "lacking in ethics" from an established moral point of view. Kobayashi Hideo, one of the most influential critics of modern Japan, used the term "ultra-egoist" for Shiga in his essay on the writer, "Shiga Naoya" (1929). Karatani Kojin, another critic who has exerted influence on the post-modern Japan, condemned Shiga as "puerile" and "self-centered" in "Shi-shosetsu no Ryogi-sei" (1972). Different from these criticisms, I argue that in his works he overcomes such an established moral. To Shiga, Nature and all Her manifestations in human behaviors were good. As such, the accusation of him being egoistic should be considered as signs of loyalty to Nature.⁷

It is hard to prove that such a naturalistic thought came to him directly from Nietzsche. It is safer to say it came from the ancient Japanese tradition and that Nietzsche provoked the revival of the tradition in him. It is true the Japanese have never been so loyal to Nature because if they had been so, they could not have led any social life. It is also true the Japanese have always had a law system that prevents them from being so natural. However, if you look at Japanese intellectual history, you will see the repetitive manifestations of the priority given to Nature, not to social rules. The Japanese have an eternal ideal to be natural and lawless. As Hitoshi Oshima pointed out in *The Japanese World Vision (Nihonjin no Sekai-ken)*, 2010, they are not so moralistic as they appear to be.⁸

It is hard to deny that the Japanese needed Buddhism, Confucianism, even modern moral philosophy to live on till today. I insist Japanese ideal is not to realize any of such religious or moral ideals but to behave naturally and spontaneously. It is in this sense that, while acknowledging the influence of Confucianism and Protestantism, I believe that thanks to his encounter with Nietzsche, Shiga relies more on traditional values as he trusts his body more than anything else.

III

Shiga's novels are usually classified in the category of "I novels" called *shi-shosetsu*, autobiographical novels. As developmental psychologists say, narrating one's own life surely helps establishing one's self.⁹ Shiga's generation tries to write about their personal lives in order to establish their self independent from the rest of the world.

The question is what part of their lives they narrated. Many of them wrote in form of confessions about their most intimate experiences including sexual ones, believing it was the way to make up "the true self." As for Shiga, he took

another direction. Trying to discover the ideal of his self, he dug deep into the unconscious.⁹ If his novels have a particular depth that “I novels” of other writers of the time do not, it is for that reason.

“Crime of Han” is apparently not an autobiographical novel but a fiction. The story reveals the psychological and philosophical development of the hero, an alter-ego of the author. By writing it, Shiga tried to give words to his deepest self.

The hero Han is a Chinese juggler who shows in public his skill in throwing knives around the body of his wife standing against a wall. One evening, during the performance, one of the knives he threw penetrated her throat and she died immediately. A hundred of people witnessed the incident, but no one could tell if it was an intentional crime or not. He was arrested by the police on the spot and taken to a preliminary court, but himself was not sure of the intentionality of his “crime.”

Before asking him, the judge asked his colleague about the relation he had with his wife. To this, the colleague said their relation was not good but that it did not prove anything. The judge asked the same question to Han himself, who confessed the relation was so bad that he wanted her death more than once. Of course, his words could not give any evidence, either. Besides, he said he did not have the idea of killing her at the moment of throwing the fatal knife.

The judge asked him why he did not get a divorce from her if he hated living with her so much. To this, he said the divorce was not a solution for he considered it as cowardice. The judge asked him then what feeling he had at his wife’s death. To this, he answered quite positively saying he felt liberated.

The story is complicated because there is no evidence for the murder. Han admitted he had thought of killing his wife many times, but he was not sure if he killed her intentionally or not when it happened. You would say if he had thought of killing her and that she died of the knife he threw against her, he must be guilty. But things are not so simple as it appears to be.

At the end of the novel, we see the judge declared “Not guilty.” It is not only because there was no evidence for the murder, but also because he was touched by the extreme honesty and sincerity of the suspect. Before declaring “Not guilty,” he said to Han the following: “It seems that there is no lie in what you said.”

In fact, Han said he was not sure if he killed his wife intentionally or not. He confessed he wanted her death many times, but that he did not throw the knife against her thinking of killing her. Does this mean he killed his wife against his will? No, because he never said it was an accident. He was not sure if it was an accident or not.

We should not overlook the fact his body acted fatally just in response to

his wife's reaction to him. Just at the moment of throwing the fatal knife, he saw her eyes wide open with fear, with presentiment of being killed. He killed her responding to her reaction. Without her "collaboration," he would not have killed her.

IV

Now, where is an ethics in all this? We can find a hint to the question in the last passage of the work:

"By the way", the judge asked Han, "don't you feel any sadness at your wife's death?"

"No, not at all. I have never imagined myself talking on my wife's death with such a joy. Even when I hated her dreadfully, I could never imagine myself like that!"

To hear it, the judge said "That's enough. You can leave."

Han bowed a little and then left the room without saying a word.

The judge felt some excitement coming up to him. He took the pen immediately and wrote "Not guilty" with it on the spot. (Shiga 2-91)

The judge felt excited hearing Han and the excitement was not far from joy. He was touched by Han's will to find out his "true life" and live it on. Indeed, being loyal to one's self and live it fully was one of the important elements of Shiga's ethics.

The judge was touched by Han's eagerness to recover his "true life" on hearing him saying the following:

I didn't make up mind to kill my wife for fear of laws. It was just my weakness that kept me from killing. I wanted her death because I had a strong desire to have my true life. I was weak but my desire was strong.(Shiga 2-84)

Han hated his wife because she had a relation with another man and got a baby from it. She regretted it and he tried to pardon her by becoming Christian, but he found the religion repressive, hypocrite and weak. So he began to think seriously of killing her even if it could send him to prison. The following is his argument on it, in which he shows disregard of law and order and strong desire to recover his "true life:"

Suppose I kill her, I said to myself, what will happen afterwards is a question

of tomorrow, not of today. I will probably be in prison, but the life in prison must be much better than the life I am leading now. I can't live for tomorrow. I have to live now. What will happen tomorrow, I don't care. Come what may, I will make a true life. They may bother me continuously, but I won't give up. And thus, trying continuously to make my life will be my true life.(Shiga 2-86)

It is this serious inquiry of “true life” or “true self” of the suspect that touched the judge who declared him innocent.

Returning to the crime, it was not caused by Han's will but his body. That is why he did not feel any bad consciousness about his deed. Moreover, his body acted in accordance with the reaction of his wife who saw his unusual state of mind at the moment. There was an interaction between the two bodies. If there was a crime, it was done by the two bodies in collaboration.

It could be argued that Han's body as described was inseparable from his mind so that Han cannot but be responsible for the crime. Yet in the author's eyes, the criminal was not himself but the bodies of the couple. The following words of Han that describe his state of mind during the night before the crime gives a hint for it:

Absorbed by the idea of killing her, I almost forgot the presence of my wife lying beside me in the bed. I began to feel exhausted. But it wasn't a fatigue that could help me sleep. Everything began to be vague to me. I began to lose tension in me. I was losing the clear vision of murder little by little. I began to feel sad as if I had just woken up of a nightmare. I was truly sad to find myself weak enough to have lost the idea of murder so easily before the daybreak. ..And at last, the day broke. I think she did not sleep at all, either. (Shiga 2-86)

During the night before the crime, Han's wife laid awake beside him while he was thinking of killing her. What thought did she have overnight? We never know. She may have thought he would put an end to her life at any moment. But feeling the danger, she did not run away from him. Half-conscious of the possibility of her death, she decided to present the fatal show with him.

As mentioned earlier, Han knew if he killed his wife, he would be punished by law and put into prison. However, he did not care about it so much. He said “It is not because of the fear of law that I didn't make up my mind to kill her”(Shiga 2-84). If he wanted to kill her, it was only because he wanted to live a ‘true life’. He even thought the life in prison would be better than the one he was living with

his wife. But this does not mean he wanted to be punished. He was honest enough to confess that he preferred avoiding punishment, and actually sought for a way out.

Toward the end of the novel, Han realized he did not have to tell a lie to avoid punished by law. He realized there was neither evidence nor logical ground for anyone to think it was an intentional murder. Thus he found a way out without telling any lie to justify himself. To be free of penalty without losing sincerity and honesty, that is the point he got. He became all the happier.

From the point of view of social moral, the fact he was happy with his wife's death is already condemnable. The fact he thought of killing her many times is a crime, you may say. Nevertheless, Shiga's hero did not care about it because his only concern was to realize his "true life," to recover his self. You may say he could get divorce to have a "true" life. To this, he said "To be away from her isn't the same at all with to kill her"(Shiga 2-86). To him, divorce was not a solution because he considered it as cowardice and a lie to himself.

There was no room in him for social moral. The ethical setting of the work is not "good or evil" but "strong or weak." For Shiga, the author, said the following to explain the motive of the work:

A cousin of mine killed himself because of the bad relation with his wife, just like the case of my short novel, *Crime of Han*. I felt indignant of his death so much so that I said to myself if he could not live happily with the woman by any means, he should have killed her instead of himself. (Shiga 8-9)

V

As mentioned earlier, "Crime of Han" was a work of ethical nature although it goes against socially established moral. I argue if there was any ethics in it, it was a Nietzschean one. The German philosopher stated, "There is more reason in your body than in your essence of wisdom" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 101). He also claimed that "your neighbor-love is your bad love of yourselves" (Nietzsche 209).¹⁰ The hero of Shiga, Han, gave "reason" to his body to end the life of his wife without falling into a false notion of love and pardon that Zarathustra would have condemned as hypocrisy. The affinity the Japanese writer felt with Nietzsche was not ungrounded.

However, we should not overlook the fact that Shiga belonged to another cultural tradition than the Western one. He belonged to the tradition based on

the vision of divine Nature, out of which his vision of the body came. If Shiga’s thought of the body differs slightly from Nietzsche’s, it is because of the vision. He stressed that the interaction between two bodies are more important than an individual body’s action. The philosopher of “will to power” does not seem to have seen the notion of interaction.

VI

To end the article, I would like to position Shiga’s thought expressed in his literary works in terms of Levinasian ethics. I will sum up shortly the characteristics of his ethics, using one of his works titled “*Le temps et l’autre*.” Levinas starts from the point of view of his master Martin Heidegger, that is the distinction of *Seiende*(=*l’étant, be-ings*) from *Sein*(=*l’être, Being*). He sees like his master that our existence that is *be-ing* is completely isolated from *Being*. That is why, he says, we are always wanting *the other*(=*l’autre*).

Our desire of *the other* is in vain, he adds, because *the other* we think of is not really *the other* but an extension of our self. *The other* according to Levinas is someone impossible to know or understand. We could never identify ourselves with him or her, nor should we do it. It is only by death that we can face *the other*, he says. As death is unknown to us, it gives a chance for us to face *the other*. Now, death is another name of *Non-Being*. Levinas’ philosophy of *the other* is then a philosophy of *Non-Being*. If philosophy consists in the quest for *Being* as is thought in the West, his thought is not a philosophy.

As for Shiga, his ethical thought, especially at its last stage, was somewhat Levinasian. His long novel, “A Voyage by a Long Dark Night”(An-ya Koro, 1937), shows the process for a man to get to recognize *the other* by facing death. The novel begins with his quest for *Being, Self, Identity* and ends with its failure. *The other* comes up to him when he accepts *Non-Being* at the end.

As “Crime of Han” was written much earlier, it does not embody Levinas’ ethics. The hero Han, who seeks for *Being* and *Self*, is rather Heideggerian. To him, the presence of *the other* (that is his wife) is just unbearable. That is why he wants to annihilate her existence and accomplishes it when he gives way to his body. His eyes and hers meet just before the incident. It is the moment that he could see *the other*. Nevertheless, at the very next moment, she dies. *The other* disappears leaving him alone.

This means the short novel “Crime of Han” is more Heideggerian than Levinasian. But this does not mean the author was not on the way to Levinas. Seeing the final point he reached with “An-ya Koro,” we could say he had

already begun walking on Levinasian road. The short autobiographical work “At Kinosaki”(1917) indicates that he was at a waypoint on the road. The following passage of “At Kinosaki” shows it:

Recently I wrote a novel titled “Crime of Han”. It was a story of a murder. (...) I wrote it from the point of view of the hero who killed his wife. But now, I begin to feel like writing the story from the wife’s point of view. The point of view of a woman killed by her husband, sleeping silently beneath her tomb. (Shiga 2-177, 178)

Here we see the shift Shiga made from Heideggerian “Crime of Han” to Levinasian ethics of *the other*. The phrase ‘the point of view of a woman killed by her husband’ indicates the big turning. Starting from Nietzsche, getting through a Heideggerian quest, he approached Levinasian ethics.

We should not forget the old Japanese tradition of divine Nature working there as well. But the tradition alone could not lead him so far. After all, Shiga was a modern man under the Western influence. Struggling with his surroundings, digging deep into his Self, he discovered an ethical dimension proper to modernity.

Notes

1. The original title is “Han no Hanzai” published in the review “*Shirakaba*” (1913).
2. They used to call him “*shosetsu no kamisama*” which literally means “a god in writing novels.” Nowadays, the expression is hardly heard, but he is considered as one of the most important writers of modern Japan all the same.
3. The English version “Han’s Crime” is made by Lane Dunlop in *The Paper Door and Other Stories*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1990. The French one “Le crime de Han” by Marc Mécrcéan in *Le Samourai*, Gérard-UNESCO, 1970.
4. Shiga’s essay “Uchimura Kanzo Sensei no Omoide”(A Memory of My Teacher Uchimura Kanzo, 1941) in *Shiga Naoaya Zenshu* Vol.7 shows how he became a Christian.
5. All the translations of Shiga’s text in this article is mine. “Shiga 10-511” means the translation is taken from page 511 in Volume 10 of the *Complete Works of Shiga*.
6. The translation in English is mine from the French version of the work.
7. In Shiga’s quest for individual freedom, the role that Mushanokoji Saneatsu (1885-1976) played should not be overlooked. As a best classmate in Gakushu-in high school, Mushanokoji was an ardent lover of Leo Tolstoy’s novels and Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings. It is sure he encouraged Shiga by his universalism as well as individualism. He used to say “The

more individual you are, the more universal you become”⁹(9). This thought is best expressed in Mushanokoji’s “*Jinrui no ishi ni-tsuite*”(On the will of Humanity, 1935), which you may find in Mushanokoji Saneatsu Zenshu, Vol.10, Shogakkan, 1989)

8. See Oshima’s *Le développement d’une pensée mythique* -pour comprendre la pensée japonaise- (Editions Osiris, 1994).

9. See, for example, Katherine Nelson’s “Narrative and the Emergence of a Consciousness of Self” or Valery G. Hardcastle’s “The Development of the Self.” both articles are included in *Narrative and Consciousness* edited by G.Fireman, T.McVay Jr., O. Flanagan(Oxford University Press, 2003).

10. In his diary of March the 7th,1912, he wrote, “Mining what is in me, that’s what I should do.”

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