

## BOOK REVIEWS

# The Name of the Flower

By Kuniko Mukoda

Translated from the Japanese by Tomone Matsumoto

STONE BRIDGE PRESS: BERKELEY, 1994

As much as any short story collection possesses a dominant mood or prevailing tone, Kuniko Mukoda's tales of modern Japan, *The Name of the Flower*, embrace a sense of urban foreboding, of men and women moving through their daily rhythms and routines in a disturbingly listless, dispassionate way. The characters who haunt these stories are weary and spent, drained of any meaningful emotional energy whatsoever. They sit, watch and wait. Welcome to the world of Kuniko Mukoda.

The lead story and book's namesake, "The Name of the Flower," immediately sets the mood of indifference that is woven throughout all thirteen of the stories. The story is about a husband and wife of some twenty-five years, and how they carry on their hollow relationship. For the most part, their marriage is—and has been—one of appearances only, of decorations and flowers, of superficial ornamentation. Even when the wife discovers that the husband had once had an affair, she experiences nothing like anger or pain, not even a sadness. Instead, the best she can do is offer a dull understanding—to coin a Japanese saying, *shoganai*, "It couldn't be helped." Her reaction to his extramarital affair exemplifies the essence of their relationship, and in many ways their very lifestyle—something caught between endurance and tolerance.

"Small Change" is a story that echoes the tone of "The Name of the Flower" except its telling revolves around a married man and his mistress. Similarly, this story, too, goes on to celebrate the world of appearances at the expense of emotions and compassion. In this case, we see how Tomoko, the very bovine-like, obedient and dutiful mistress, decides to have an operation to make her eyes more Western, and thus, she thinks, more appealing. Unfortunately, Shoji, her lover, is not as enthusiastic with the change, and while she gains a new self-confidence, he can only feel exhaustion.

In "Fake Egg," we learn about Sachiko, a wife who longs to become pregnant, and Takeo, her husband who has done his best to accommodate her, but has failed so far. However, eventually, and somewhat mysteriously, Sachiko does manage to become pregnant, and as she sits reflecting on her marriage, we are told that "She was not unhappy in her marriage, but she had never experienced burning passion either" (95). This, I think, is a key thematic sentence for not only this relationship, but for most of the relationships—be they marriages or not—that we encounter in the collection.

Mukoda's stories also take aim at the psychological tensions that bind family members, brother to brother, father to son, daughter to mother. These are family bonds and ancestral ties that are often invisible, unspoken, and yet a very real part of these characters' lives.

"Ears," for instance, is the story of a man who possesses a lingering guilt about what he had done as a small boy to ruin his

brother's future. Or how about "Window," how a man's long-felt anger over his father's weakness and his mother's unfaithfulness is finally, many years later, mollified in his son-in-law's betrayal.

Once again, these are all tales of psychological hauntings, of unfriendly remembrances refusing to go away. But even more disturbing is the fact that emotions and feelings go unsaid and unexpressed. Our characters have become so accustomed to silence that even when given the opportunity they don't know what to say, let alone how to say it.

*The Name of the Flower* is a collection of tales of modern Japanese housewives, hard-working businessmen and assorted lovers who, although economically comfortable, drift spiritless and uncommitted through the new wealth of 1970s Japan. Mukoda is clearly questioning the value of such material success when people have grown so uncaring and emotionally drained.

What do such stories of modern Japan have to offer Western students? For the Western reader who may be unfamiliar with modern Japanese fiction, Mukoda's stories should certainly raise some provocative questions. For instance, first-time readers of Japanese fiction may well wonder if this aloofness or emotional detachment that we see in her characters is something typically Japanese. As Western readers, are we to interpret this as a kind of insensitivity, or are we guilty of misreading, of projecting our Western mindset onto characters, relationships and situations that are, in fact, comfortably Japanese? Or a larger question still: is Mukoda commenting on a psychology that goes beyond nation and individual culture? In sum, how much of her story telling is Japan and Japanese and how much of it is the stuff of fiction?

As far as *The Name of the Flower* collection is concerned, the answers to these questions hover somewhere between Mukoda's commenting on Japanese culture and storytelling.

For those students who have been brought up on action-packed, high-energy stories, *The Name of the Flower* may be a trying experience. The stories are not difficult, but they are flat and void of any physical action. However, this need not be negative; on the contrary, Mukoda is a wonderful storyteller, as she pulls us into the uneventful worlds of her characters. Nevertheless, students might read her tales as being superficial and unimportant, and, as a result, boring because "nothing happens." Again, as far as action is concerned, not a lot happens in her stories, but to a great extent this notion of nonaction and paralysis is precisely Mukoda's point. She gives us psychological studies of husbands and wives, of daughters and sons who, in their own ways, are trying to deal with what they have and who they are; her stories are about people who are stoically, quietly waiting for that one special something to happen that will make their daily walkings and talkings just a little more important. In short, her stories are about you and me.

From another perspective, as a Japanese writer Mukoda challenges Western readers to rethink their expectations as to what a story is or should be. In the case of Japanese short fiction, or *tampen shosetsu*—short length narratives—it is not unusual for stories to lack the structural elements that Western readers have come to expect from a short work of fiction, elements such as rich character development, combined with a unity of plot, place and tone. We have come to expect a story line that is stimulated by action. Being introduced to what many might see as a "different" kind of style can be most instructive to students who have read little

or no modern Japanese short fiction. For this style—the way characters seem not to relate to one another, the way plot refuses to depend on action to move it along—serves to exemplify the Japanese tendency to emphasize “suggestion and evocative power rather than description and eloquence.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly this is a tendency that goes far beyond just the literary. In many ways, it is the very essence of Japanese culture itself. This kind of what some might call “non-Western” writing invites Western students to, first, reevaluate their beliefs of what makes a “good” story, and second, it offers them glimpses and hints of some of the more subtle psychological undercurrents and nuances that are alive and well in Japanese culture.

Finally, the translator, Tomone Matsumoto, must be applauded for not only capturing so much of this unspokenness but also for presenting such an informative biographical sketch on the late Kuniko Mukoda. Although Kuniko Mukoda died in an airplane accident in 1981, her visions, imagery and thoughtful commentary live on, and for this, all readers of literature can be thankful. ■

#### NOTES

1. *This Kind of Woman: Ten Stories by Japanese Women Writers, 1960–1976*, eds. Yukiko Tanaka and Elizabeth Hanson. Translated by Mona Nagai. (Ann Arbor: Michigan Classics in Japanese Studies, 12, University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1994) xxiv. Tanaka’s introduction is especially useful in giving readers a short historical overview of the Japanese woman as writer in Japanese literature. In addition, Donald Keene’s *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), particularly the chapter dealing with “Japanese Aesthetics” (1–22), is a good introduction to what Keene calls “Japanese taste.”

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