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Josh Eyre

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When Big Brother Blinks

“December 8th,” The Makioka Sisters, and the Failures of Literary Censorship in WWII Japan

Josh Eyre

Intro

When discussing modern Japanese literature, works of the late 1930s and early 1940s are largely left out of the discussion. Stories written during this time are ignored by scholars, forgotten by readers, and at times even excluded from an author’s “complete works” by publishers (Keene 1987, 906–907). These works are often thought to be devoid of literary merit or not worth studying due to the high levels of scrutiny and censorship that Japanese authors were subjected to by the far right and intensely nationalistic Japanese government of the time. I would argue, however, that the near total dismissal of Japanese WWII literature is a mistake, and that censorship at the time may not have been as total or effective at suppressing ideas as is often thought.

To support this argument, I will focus on two works from this time period, “December 8th” by Dazai Osamu and *The Makioka Sisters* by Tanizaki Jun’ichirō. “December 8th,” despite some content which seems to reflect negatively on the war effort, was permitted publication with no problems raised by censors. *The Makioka Sisters*, despite a complete lack of any content that could be considered controversial or negative toward the war effort, had its publication halted early into its serialization. It is clear that the censors were influenced by factors other than just the content of these stories alone. My argument, therefore, is that Dazai Osamu’s short story, “December 8th,” and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō’s novel, *The Makioka Sisters*, were treated differently by the censors not because of the actual content of the stories but rather due to other factors around their publication, and

thus literary censorship was not as effective at suppressing thought as is often believed. To support this argument, I will examine the general state of Japanese Literature during WWII, as well as these two stories and the details around their publication.

Historical Background

Literary censorship was not a new concept to Japan at the start of WWII. Rather, censorship had been an ongoing national project since early in the Meiji period, though it reached its climax in the late 1930s or early 40s (Rubin 1984, 4, 10–11; Abel 2005, 53–55). Once Japan had entered into military conflict with its neighbors, authors felt great pressure to support the military effort with their writings which caused the field of literature during WWII to be dominated by intensely nationalistic stories with little literary merit (Keene 1964, 209). Due to this perception, critics and literary scholars often dismiss works of this time period fully out of hand.

However, critics may not be totally justified in the belief that government censorship in WWII Japan was so complete and effective as to render all literary works of the time devoid of literary merit. For example, although some literary scholars allude to a sharp increase in censorship that began in December 1941—immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor—there seems to be little evidence of this. In fact, the number of works censored each year actually decreased once the war had been declared (Abel 2005, 53–55). Likely, these scholars are referencing instances such as the one that occurred in December 1941, in which a number of prominent left-leaning authors were rounded up and imprisoned (Keene 1964, 209). Most of these authors were released within just a few days, upon promising “that they had changed their political views” (Keene 1964, 209). Though it seems strange that these authors were believed and released on their word alone, evidently this decision was effective as “most of [these] released men” went on to cooperate “with the government during the war in the manner required of all writers,” largely falling in line to support the government and the war effort (Keene 1964, 209).

One factor that likely had an even greater impact on publishing in post-1941 Japan than censorship itself was a major paper shortage that began in early 1941 and only continued to grow in severity as the war stretched on (Rubin 1984, 270–271). While this paper shortage affected all publications, regardless of ideology, the censors capitalized on the situation. More paper was allotted to nationalistic publications that unambiguously supported the war effort and less paper went to liberal publications, which were not quite as enthusiastic in their support of the war. This weaponization of the paper shortage forced many liberal-leaning publications to shrink their magazines and business efforts, change their political stances, and even caused

some to completely shut down (Rubin 1984, 270–271). While utilizing the paper shortage as an instrument of censorship was effective, by the war's end, the censors would resort to more direct efforts when necessary.

Dazai Osamu

Dazai Osamu stands as a singularly interesting author among Japanese WWII era authors. He entered the literary scene in the mid 1930s, immediately attracting interest due to his nomination in the first and third Akutagawa Ryūnosuke literary prizes and the ensuing scandal as Dazai publicly responded to the perceived slight he had received upon being rejected by renowned author and judge Kawabata Yasunari (Lyons 1985, 37–38). Dazai's popularity wouldn't peak, however, until after the publication of his two great postwar novels, *The Setting Sun* and *No Longer Human*, the latter of which was published posthumously after Dazai's suicide in 1948 (O'Brien 1975, 121–122). Though Dazai's post-war output was the shortest section of his career, it is also the part that attracts the most attention, both from scholars and casual readers, with his works written during the war attracting the least.

This relative lack of scholarly attention comes despite critics' claims that, during WWII, Dazai's work stood alone as “works of indisputable literary merit . . . amidst the general paralysis of literature during the war” (O'Brien 1975, 89). Dazai himself may have explained the difference between his wartime works and those of his contemporaries in his short postwar essay, “The 15 Year Era.” In this essay, Dazai claims he saw many other authors writing stories they hoped would help the nation during the war by stoking the flames of nationalism in the citizenry. In contrast, Dazai claims to have wanted to write stories that would help his fellow civilians not in supporting the war effort, but in having the morale to get through the war effort (Lyons 1985, 153–157). Through most of the war, his stories largely ignored the war itself and focused on maintaining some of the satiric humor that he was known for. Just as many of his peers were writing more serious stories, Dazai's work became funnier and lighter.

Dazai's argument is also corroborated by scholarship which claims that Dazai was largely “politically innocent” during the war (O'Brien 1975, 88). Though he had some ties to communism before the war, by the end of the war, Dazai was one of relatively few authors commissioned by the government to write a nationalistic story (Keene 1964, 219). This would seem to indicate that Dazai remained on relatively good terms with the government and the censors.

“December 8th”

Dazai Osamu’s “December 8th” is presented as the diary of a woman as she goes through her daily life on the day of December 8, 1941, including her thoughts on first hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japan and the US going to war. The narrator of this story is married to an idiotic, good-for-nothing drunk. She often remarks on his foolishness and lack of knowledge or understanding of the world around him as she goes about her daily chores, including dealing with increasingly rationed food: a detail that shows the difficult domestic side of the war (Dazai 1942a, 373–380).

Donald Keene, a noted Japanese Literature scholar, has called “December 8th” “the only humorous story I know about the outbreak of war” (Keene 1964, 218). Keene claims that in “December 8th,” Dazai is “caricaturing often expressed [wartime] sentiments” through the drunken husband’s statements of unshakable faith in Japan’s ability to win the war (Keene 1964, 218). Dazai not only satirizes common sayings of the day, but seems to directly reference Hideki Tōjō’s speech given on December 8, 1941.

“December 8th” seems to satirize one section of Tōjō’s speech in particular. Early in the speech Tōjō declares “[t]he key to victory lies in a ‘faith in victory.’ For 2,600 years since it was founded, our Empire has never known a defeat. This record alone is enough to produce a conviction in our ability to crush any enemy no matter how strong. Let us pledge ourselves that we will never stain our glorious history” (Tōjō 1941a, 70). Much like Tōjō references Japan’s 2,600 year history, “December 8th” begins with the narrator’s musings on how the people of Japan, 100 years in the future, on the 2,700th anniversary of founding day, will look back at her time (Dazai 1942a, 373). While Tōjō looks to the past to justify the present attitude and actions of Japan, Dazai seems to be looking to the future, as if suggesting that there are more important considerations to take into account.

A short time later Dazai writes a short scene in which, after the narrator’s husband’s complete ignorance of anything having to do with the United States is made clear, she asks her husband if he thought “Japan really will be, OK?” to which he replied “We’re all right—don’t you think that’s why they did it? We’re sure to win” (Dazai 1942a, 376). Here, the narrator’s husband seems to be the perfect picture of the “conviction in [Japan’s] ability to crush any enemy no matter how strong” that Tōjō spoke of (Tōjō 1941a, 70). The husband believes, just as Tōjō would have wished, that Japan is incapable of failure. This sentiment is immediately undercut and mocked by the very next line, where the narrator reflects that “the things my husband says are always lies,” showing that, contrary to Tōjō’s words, as much conviction as he or anyone may have, it may make no real difference on the outcome (1942a, 376).

In this way, Dazai's satire seems to be established early in the story but does not hit its climax until the final lines of the story. In this scene, the narrator finds her buffoonish husband drunkenly walking home along a dark alleyway. When she attempts to lightly reprimand him, he replies with a final speech, remarkably similar to Tōjō's own. He says, "[t]he trouble with you all is that you don't have faith. That's why you have trouble on a night road like this. Now I have faith, and so the night road is just like full daylight to me. Follow me" (Dazai 1942a, 380). The scene itself seems satirical, as Dazai's "night road" stands in stark contrast to the "glorious history" that Tōjō proclaims the current age is continuing, especially in the original Japanese (The phrase used by Tōjō is 「光輝ある祖国の歴史」 which describes not only a history of glory, but also filled with brightness.) (Tōjō 1941b, Dazai 1942b). Indeed, the drunken husband's proclaimed ability to see the night road as if it is bathed in daytime seems no different than Tōjō's apparent ability to see this dark chapter in the history of Japan and the lives of its citizens as a continuation of Japan's "glorious history" (Tōjō 1941a, 380). The most clear aspect of Dazai's satire, however, is the husband's use of the word "faith," echoing Tōjō's declaration that all needed to have "faith in victory" (Dazai 1942a, 380; Tōjō 1941a, 70). While the parallelism is not nearly as perfect in the Japanese original, where Tōjō and Dazai both use different words for "faith," the image created is still the same (Tōjō 1941b; Dazai 1942b). After hearing her husband's drunken declaration, his wife, the narrator of Dazai's story, was left to wonder, "Is he even sane?" (Dazai 1942a), potentially referring to both her husband and Tōjō.

While calling "December 8th" resistance literature may be a stretch, aspects of the story clearly reflect negatively on the war efforts and the men Japan had leading those efforts. Nevertheless, the censors permitted "December 8th" to be published.

Tanizaki Jun'ichirō

Tanizaki Jun'ichirō had a very different career trajectory than Dazai Osamu during these same years. Unlike Dazai, Tanizaki was already an established and extremely well-known author by the outbreak of the war and had had numerous problems with the censors over the preceding two decades. A number of short stories written by Tanizaki in the 1910s had been heavily censored or recalled after publication. His popular novel *Naomi*, serialized from 1924–1925 and now a mainstay in modern Japanese literary canon, was canceled in one publication after receiving threats from censors. This forced Tanizaki to finish publishing *Naomi* in another magazine, which, oddly, he seemed to face no additional opposition in so doing (Rubin 1984, 236–237). Shortly after, Tanizaki turned to writing for

the theater—a field which had been left relatively untouched by censors through the Meiji period. This shift in focus provided him little reprieve however as theater censorship was growing at the time and his ongoing problems with censorship continued (Rubin 1984, 239-242).

Tanizaki, as an established author not fond of the war effort, was able to engage in the one form of true resistance left to authors during the war: to “refrain . . . from publishing” (Keene 1964, 209). After his attempt at publishing *The Makioka Sisters* failed due to censorship, he largely refrained from further wartime publishing. Instead, he chose to continue writing *The Makioka Sisters* himself while waiting for the time it could be published (Rubin 1984, 265).

The Makioka Sisters

The Makioka Sisters tells the story of three sisters from a wealthy aristocratic family as they try to navigate marriage, suitors, and modernity in 1930s Japan. The only potential act of resistance comes from how the story firmly refuses to acknowledge the present conflict of the war, at least partially due to its setting in the 1930s (Chambers 1998, 133).

This aversion to the war and focus on the lives of women, presumably rather than those of fighting men, is important to note, as it was this aspect of the story that was cited as the reason why *The Makioka Sisters* was canceled by the censors shortly into its publication run (Chambers 1998, 134). This seems extremely unlikely to truly be the reason why *The Makioka Sisters* was canceled, however, as “December 8th” has that same focus on the domestic lives of women, albeit set against a war background, which *The Makioka Sisters* lacks.

Publication and Censorship

Rather than the content of the stories themselves, the factors which seem most likely to have contributed to the respective treatment by censors of “December 8th” and *The Makioka Sisters* would be the specific time in which each story was published as well as the relationship each author and publisher had with censorship at that time.

“December 8th” was published shortly after the outbreak of war with the US. Nationalism and public fervor were riding high, and the publication industry had yet to suffer from the worst of the wartime shortages. Tanizaki’s *The Makioka Sisters*, on the other hand, had the misfortune of beginning its publication run later in the war when paper shortages and increased feelings of desperation caused publication to be more restricted. Tanizaki’s notoriety with the censors likely also drew more scrutiny when

he attempted to publish, unlike a relatively unknown author like Dazai would have drawn at the start of the war.

Additionally, *Chūō Kōron*, the publication that was serializing Tanizaki's story, seems to have specifically been targeted by the government since at least the late 1930s (Rubin 1984, 257-258). By the time *The Makioka Sisters* began serialization *Fujin Kōron*, a women's literature subsidiary of *Chūō Kōron* and the magazine that had first published Dazai's "December 8th," had already been forced to shut down due to targeted paper shortages affecting both it and its parent company (Rubin 1984, 271). A short time after *The Makioka Sisters* was canceled, the Japanese government took direct action against *Chūō Kōron*, destroying their offices and arresting the few remaining staff members (Hatanaka 1992b, 222).

An editor of *Chūō Kōron*, who has spoken a number of times on the illegal imprisonment and torture he faced after the magazine was forcibly shut down, has also spoken on *The Makioka Sisters* situation. He claims that it was essentially a completely innocent story that found itself caught in the crossfires between the Japanese censors and *Chūō Kōron*, and that the reasons given for its censorship were entirely farcical. According to him, the censors were trying to prevent a magazine that they had almost succeeded in destroying from gaining a financial second wind by publishing a new and excellent story from a popular and somewhat controversial author (Hatanaka 1992a, 67).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the likely reasons why "December 8th" and *The Makioka Sisters* were treated differently are varied and complex. Wartime censorship was not the effective machine it is sometimes seen to be. It seems the decision to allow "December 8th" publication and deny *The Makioka Sisters* could not have been reached purely by evaluating their content. Rather, wartime censorship varied depending on when a work was published, the author's previous relationship with censorship, the publisher itself, and potentially other factors.

This would indicate that Japanese wartime literary censorship was not and could not have been the completely effective thought-suppressing machine it is often thought to be. Therefore, treating Japanese WWII literature as a monolith devoid of any literary value, as it has largely been treated by scholarship thus far, is a mistake. Though censors may have tried to force Japanese literature into becoming exactly that, some stories clearly slipped through the cracks, and, in some instances at least, the censors failed.

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