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# A Metamorphosis of Images: Lafcadio Hearn's "Snow Woman" in Japanese Contemporary Theatre and Film

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In this paper, I will discuss a set of contemporary images on stage and in film that encompass the ideal encounter between Western and Eastern traditions reflected in the writings of Greek born Irish literary figure, Patrick Lafcadio Hearn. Stimulated by a Japanese exhibition at the 1884-85 New Orleans World Expo, combined with his reading of Basil Hall Chamberlain's English translation of *The Kojiki, Records of Ancient Matters*, Hearn came to Japan in 1890, after spending years in Ireland, England, France, the States and Martinique Island. Though fascinated by whatsoever and whosoever he encountered in Japan, Hearn, at the same time, was dismayed by Japan's rush toward modernization by chasing after Western standards while ignoring its own cultural treasures, especially classic folktales. By collecting and rewriting folklore and classic literature in his own delicate, subtle, poetic prose, Hearn tried to resurrect the spirit of classical Japan. At Tokyo Imperial University, Hearn lectured on the importance of what was fast disappearing throughout the country to students who were being trained to lead a new modernized Japan, where the primary educational principle was to promote the Westernization of Japan—erasing even a tint of Japan's past cultural achievements.

Up until now various artists, musicians and writers have created new literary and artistic contributions through their encounters with Hearn's work. I will explore the transformation of these images, mainly focusing on one particular story, "Yuki-Onna," i.e. "Snow Woman" compiled in *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. I will discuss the metamorphosis of this story from two perspectives--its transformation from the original into Hearn's story on one hand, and from Hearn's story into other literary and theatrical genres, on the other. Because "Yuki-Onna" is filled with images of beauty within a backdrop of terror in a specific Japanese setting and sensitivity, many people regard it as a Japanese classic tale, without noticing Hearn's contribution. Interestingly, one can even trace Irish elements being merged at essential moments in the story, such as the use of *geis/gessa*, literally meaning a 'taboo' in Irish.

I will first explain the metamorphosis of how Hearn transformed an original Japanese tale to create his own masterpiece, although he lacked a good command of Japanese. Hearn's Japanese wife, Setsu Koizumi, daughter of a prestigious *samurai* warrior family, was a good story teller,

who told Hearn stories she thought he would be interested in, and then Hearn rewrote them. She did not have a good command of English, just like Hearn's rather basic Japanese, but they could communicate by an idiosyncratic pidgin-like Japanese-English dialect. Her sources were based on not only written documents but orally transmitted stories among local people over many generations. "Yuki-Onna" also evolved out of this hybrid process, but its specific original source has never been identified.

Before going further into my discussion, I should summarize the story of "Yuki-Onna." Two woodcutters, old Mosaku and young Minokichi, went to work daily in the forest across a river from their village. One evening because of a snowstorm, they took shelter in the ferryman's hut. In the middle of the night, Minokichi woke up and saw a beautiful woman dressed in white attire blowing a shiny white-colored breath of air toward Mosaku. She was about to do the same to Minokichi, but didn't, demanding that he keep everything he had seen a secret or she would kill him. A *geis* or pledge was thus enacted. After he recovered from the shock, he married a beautiful girl called Oyuki who came from outside the village. This common female name acts as kind of a pun with the word for snow "yuki" in Japanese. ("O" is a prefix providing an affectionate honorific.) They lived happily with ten children. But one night, reminded by Oyuki's dimly lit face of "somebody as beautiful and white as herself", Minokichi retold that fearful story. Instantly, Oyuki revealed her identity as Yuki-Onna, crying out that the original pledge/*geis* had been broken. Still, she could not kill him because she felt sorry leaving their children parentless, but should "they have reason to complain," she would treat him as he deserved. After uttering this warning, she disappeared like the wind.

Previous studies have already discussed the following two points. The first is that Hearn heard quite a different version of Yuki-Onna story which described a huge monster, assaulting travelers, which was retold all over Japan, (However, thanks to the power of Hearn's Yuki-Onna image, this monster image of Yuki-Onna has vanished.) Another point is that Hearn was fascinated by exogamy where humans marry animals or other worldly creatures like celestial beings or ghosts of living humans. In a 2018 NHK radio lecture series *Bon Koizumi*, Hearn's great grandson, revealed important newly discovered facts. Bon argues Hearn heard a tale of exogamy between a woodcutter and a spirit in a tree from a maid in their household, Hana, or possibly from her father, Sohachi, a gardener, who had a strong connection with woodcutters and knew their stories handed down over generations. Based on this story between a woodcutter and a spirit of a tree, Hearn's "Yuki-Onna" was created. Therefore, we could say this beautifully sad story of exogamy between a human and the spirit of snow, in which flows the theme of a mother's love, a motif Hearn presents over and over again throughout his life, is mostly Hearn's own creation. Besides, since the spirit of a tree lay behind the spirit of snow, a sense of revenge in Yuki-Onna's murder of woodcutters permeates behind the scene, as woodcutters' *métier* is killing her kin. (In Tanaka's film version they are sculptors of Buddhist statues, which adds an interesting dimension as they cut off the life of the trees to give wood eternal life with spiritual power. Moreover, Minokichi succeeded his master

Mosaku's will to carve a *kuannon*, goddess of mercy, out of wood.)

In addition, in the image of Yuki-Onna, Irish and Japanese images are integrated. One is the spirit of trees. Both in Ireland and Japan, every tree is thought to have its own spirit. In Ireland even now a highway takes a detour evading a fairy tree. A literal meaning of a religious and intellectual leader of ancient Ireland, "Druid," meaning "wise man of Oak Trees," illustrates how, trees have been worshiped since ancient times. Hearn's special affection towards trees can be found in his lecture given at Tokyo Imperial University entitled "On Tree Spirits in Western Poetry," his re-told stories such as "The Story of Aoyagi," a tragic exogamy of a beautiful willow spirit and a human, and essays like "*Gaki*" in which he develops a local tale in Shiga Prefecture of a tree spirit's revenge on a thoughtless man cutting down a tree. Setsu in her memoir explains how Hearn severed even the most intimate relations with people if they cut trees, especially temple trees.]

Another element related to Ireland is Hearn's use of wind. Yuki-Onna comes into the hut with the snowy wind and the ending of the story concludes like this:

Even as she screamed, her voice became thin, like a crying of wind; —then she melted into a bright white mist that spired to the roof-beams, and shuddered away through the smoke-hole....Never again was she seen. (*Kwaidan*, 118)

Yuki-Onna is thus described as one with the wind. In the Irish language fairy is called as a *sidhe*, meaning wind. A fairy in Ireland is often connected with fear, like *bean sidhe*—if people hear *bean sidhe*'s scream in the wind, someone in their immediate family is said to die in the near future. Yeats concisely explains the fear as related to this fairy as follows:

Hearn also says in his lecture "Some Fairy Literature," ...the fairy belief is much more terrible and gloomy; there is no humour in it; its subject is supreme fear"(*Life and Literature*, 328). In "The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction", Hearn writes:

In Hearn's view, a fairy is related to fear, and the literature which arouses fear and contains something ghostly is, in his opinion, great art. His "Yuki-Onna" embodies this idea. Developing this point further, we could also say since ghostly, other-worldly and supernatural Yuki-Onna embodies trees, snow and wind, she is nature's spirit itself. She is supernatural, but natural to the extreme. I do not like to transform this mysterious image into something banally pedagogic, but we humans living in the 21st century should hear Hearn's or nature's warning against environmental issues caused by humans.

Let me now quickly turn to the film version of this story. In the 1965 highly artistic film, *Kwaidan*, which won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, Masaki Kobayashi combines classical Japanese images with modern/postmodern imagery. The film's details including scenes, character development, props and scripts are very realistic, with a huge eye in the sky dystinh directly down toward the audience, with both sound effects and music composed by the internationally recognized composer Toru Takemitsu, giving the story a mysteriously symbolic and

abstract feeling. The huge mysterious gold eyes in the sky are constantly watching the whole scene, especially Minokichi's behavior--these eyes seem to be a visual embodiment of the *geis*/pledge. The image of these eyes is handed down to succeeding films: an impressive huge eye reappears in a drawing on the wall in Kiki Sugino's 2017 version. In the 1968 a much less artistic version entitled *Kaidan Yukiujoro* by Tokuzo Tanaka, the golden eyes of Yuki-Onna enhances the image of a strikingly spooky power of an otherworldly creature. The story line of Kobayashi's "Yuki-Onna" is quite true to Hearn's original--with a special emphasis on mother's love. Also Kobayashi suggests that her change of character is caused by her appreciation of human love. In the course of living with Minokichi and their children she came to appreciate human affection, and at the end when she transformed herself into her real self as Yuki-Onna, the maternal love that had grown inside her never left her. Tanaka's version treats this maternal love with a sense of discrimination. The narration at the end of the film, "Yuki-Onna, who is supposed to never have any emotion, got mercy" reveals a human arrogance reflected in a sense of superiority over other beings--quite the opposite of Hearn's open-mindedness which accepts everything without prejudice. (Remember Minokichi in the 1968 version carved a statue of the goddess of mercy out of a tree.) In addition, the feudal order of a class-based society without any introspection is present--the death of Minokichi's master's wife caused by an agent of the lord reflects inhuman treatment of an "inferior" arising from class, gender and age differences, literally socially vulnerable people being abused. In this way, Tanaka's version and to some extent Kobayashi's version as well reflect the way of thinking accepted in the 1960s', parts of which have already become somewhat obsolete.

The 2017 film by a director/ actress Kiki Sugino, with herself as Yuki-Onna gets rid of this kind of prejudice, which is true to Hearn's intention, though many new details were added to the film. As she saw universal issues flowing in Hearn that go beyond a specific time and place, her version presents issues we in the 21st century face--like emigration/immigration, present day US policy etc. The film starts with the black and white image of snow falling from the sky onto the trees in the forest which gives us the impression of the countryside in the Edo Period or even an earlier time. The audience is immediately drawn into the scene and then the story of Minokichi and Mosaku, commences. The principal points of the beauty and terror--Yuki-Onna appearing with the snowstorm, killing Mosaku by blowing her breath toward him, and then disappearing with the *geis*--is presented true to the original in an exquisite black and white image. Then the black and white image changes into a colored scene of Minokichi and his cousin crossing the river on the boat to the forest. Our sense of time is destroyed with the dexterous use of the attire Minokichi's cousin wears--he wears westernized clothes worn around the 1920s or early 30s in Japan. The audience's sense of time becomes suspended. In addition, Minokichi's house is lit by a dim electric light, a modern invention. In this suspenseful scene, the audience begins to accept that this is when modernization was established through a Westernized way of living in Japan even in Minokichi's household, which mostly followed a traditional Japanese way of life, using electricity. Minokichi's uncle, in contrast, runs the electric company, who was observant of the principle that Japan was pursuing

in those days which Hearn thought was deplorable. In this exquisitely subtle film Sugino's sense of awe and nostalgic admiration towards "what is not seen" runs throughout the film. Minokichi's mother's words, "Our human knowledge is limited. We know only a part of the universe" reflects Sugino's respect for "what is unseen" in nature, which shows the same as what Hearn calls "ghost" or "ghostly." When Hearn emphasizes the importance of human communication with other-world(ly) or supernatural beings, he is not being spooky or maniacally cultic, but he appreciates what is not in oneself --the opposite to an idea of exclusion. Since he appreciates "what is not yourself," he respects people with different opinions, religious beliefs, and cultures as well as their existence in nature. This comes back to our previous discussion of Hearn's "Open Mind." This leads us to Sugino's unusual interest in a child born out of parents from two different dimensions--exogamy. This also pertains to the same kind of crucial contemporary issue of not excluding others when someone contains elements of different beings residing inside a singular persona.

The 2012 rendition in Jiří Barta's Czech film, *Snow Woman*, gives a Western point of view of Japan--which takes on a mysteriously exotic feel, with the dexterously unique technique of combining wax with other materials like asphalt, oil, crayon, photos and real human acting. Overall this new mysterious abstraction, simultaneously brings concrete yet magical images. The music also presents an interesting mixture of Czech and Japanese cultural contributions. In addition to the newly composed film score by Michal Novinski, a melody called "Going Home," from the 2nd movement of Dvorjak's 9th Symphony "From the New World," provides an interestingly nostalgic touch to the Japanese audience, because that very music was used to get elementary school children to go home once classes had finished. Overall, this short film presents an understanding by a Western artist --originating from the outside but going straight to the core of the generic Japanese soul.

In this way Sugino's and Barta's versions, both reveal distinctively original insights as well as a universality beyond time and space. These four films prove that Hearn's work simultaneously marks and transcends the spirit of a specific time and place, containing universal principles relevant to anytime in history across a variety of cultures.

Finally, I will conclude by introducing another contemporary expression of Hearn's work, an idiosyncratic reading performance of Hearn The Lafcadio Reading, held annually for past twelve years, performed domestically and internationally by Shiro Sano, an actor and his friend, Kyoji Yamamoto, a musician. In addition, Hearn stimulated Sano's artistic sensitivity and let him create a short film, *A Drop of Dew*, combining Shoji Ueda's photographs with Hearn's writings, which Sano directed, acted in, based on a film script written by himself. This film develops a world of fantasy beyond time and space ---with the use of Ueda's still photos which catch the reality of the 1950s and 60s, Sano's contemporary video images and music by Kazuhiko Kato, a leader in the Japanese pop music world during 1960s.

In the reading performance Sano decides a theme annually, having titles such as "Encounter," "Promise," and "Nostalgia," for which he chooses seven to ten Hearn pieces of writing, eventually

weaving them into an integrated whole with Yamamoto's music as an essential part of the production. During their Irish tour in 2015 I saw the audience completely dazzled and spellbound regardless of the linguistic barriers—Sano read in Japanese while Hearn's original text was shown on the screen. Thanks to the power of Sano's dramatic reading which renders life to Hearn's work, mingled with Yamamoto's poetic music, the Japanese text became almost like a universal language, shattering the differences between two cultures, reinforcing the long and rich oral traditions shared between Ireland and Japan. He tells stories just like the ancient bards once did with Yamamoto's music employing *fili*'s harp. Hearn's work is transformed into a musical score where these two artists, like old bards, reinvent a unique performance style.

Another metamorphosis can be seen in a new Japanese *kyogen* version of Hearn's work, "Chin Chin Kobakama," though not "Snow Woman." In 2017, I commissioned a theatrical production led by Sengoro Shigeyama XIV, the head of the prestigious Japanese traditional *kyogen* family to commemorate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and Ireland. This turned out to be another ideal marriage between Japan and Ireland, which was accepted favorably by Irish audiences in three venues in Ireland: Dublin, Sligo and Waterford.

To conclude, Hearn's work continues to give inspiration to artists everywhere by creating fresh images that transcend both time and place, a universal language of creativity, if you will, shared by everyone. Finally, I should also mention that I wanted to explore the contribution of traditional Japanese Noh theatre running throughout this new artistic wave of Hearn related productions, but I have taken up to much of your time today so I will leave that discussion for another occasion.