

A Psycho-analytical Study of Dependence: Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's 'The Story of My Unfortunate Mother'

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Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's literary career spanned more than fifty years, commencing during the Meiji era (1869–1912), blooming in the Taisho era (1912–1926) and mellowing in the Showa era (1926–1989). The literary world in Taisho is often considered a golden age, building as it did on the new work in Meiji when western literature and ideology were imported and translated for an ever growing readership. Writers were fired with new, western ideas and Tanizaki was no exception. He was strongly influenced by Poe, Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde early in his career and his literature developed an off beat, so-called 'diabolical' tone.¹ After the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, Tanizaki moved from Tokyo to Kansai, where he abandoned westernisation and became deeply absorbed in Japanese tradition and culture. Most of his great works were published in books and literary magazines, and serialised in newspapers during the Showa period, the first complete edition of his works being published in 1957. In 1949 he received an Imperial Award for Cultural Merit, and in 1964 he became an Honorary Member of the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Though Tanizaki has long been a popular writer he is often criticised for an inability to deal with inner conflict and for his ideological indifference.² His critics consider him too superficial, too sensational, too given to probing the bizarre and the sado-masochistic. In recent times, much more emphasis has been placed on his literary technique, but discussions of his artistic insight into the nature and motivation of human beings is uncommon. In this paper I will discuss the relatively early work 'The Story of My Unfortunate Mother', published in March 1921. By focusing mainly on the mother's psychic make-up, I hope to demonstrate how deeply Tanizaki could penetrate such problems in his fiction and immerse the reader in the trauma of his characters.

'The Story of My Unfortunate Mother' revolves around the relationship between the elder brother of the story teller and their mother. When the boat on which they were travelling overturns, the

elder brother, an obedient and loyal son, abandons his mother and instead saves his wife in a situation where the one not chosen is likely to drown. All three survive, but the relationship between the brother and the mother is destroyed. The mother becomes listless and dies after rejecting all her children; following her death the brother commits suicide.

As Tanizaki describes her misfortune, we realise that although the incident on the ocean happens accidentally, the seed of the disaster has been sown long before the event. The key to what brings this woman to her death lies in the following passages which describe the relationship between the mother and children:

Mother depended on us, and we depended on her. There was deep affection because we depended on each other.

Mother could never be satisfied if she could not depend absolutely on her children.

It was obvious that a part of the reason for Mother's fear of death came from her desire to be dependent on her children.³

Renowned for choosing his words carefully, Tanizaki uses *amae* or 'dependence' several times in the story and it becomes the key to an understanding both of the mother's psyche and of her relationship with her children.

Before I proceed, therefore, the meaning of the word needs clarification. *Amae* is a noun deriving from the verb *amaeru* which means, amongst other things, to presume on familiarity in order to behave in a self-indulgent manner, as well as to take advantage of another's kindness.⁴ In psychology, more complicated emotions are attributed to it. For the prominent Japanese Freudian psychiatrist, Takeo Doi, *amae* is a word peculiar to Japanese that reveals important aspects of the Japanese psychology.⁵ John Bester, the translator of Doi's *The Anatomy of Dependence*, introduces the term from Doi's point of view:

The Japanese term *amae* refers, initially, to the feelings that all normal infants at the breast harbour toward the mother—dependence, the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the warm mother-child circle and cast into a world of objective 'reality'.⁶

Amaeru, then, roughly corresponds to 'depend on', 'presume upon', or 'make up to' in English; psychoanalytically, it suggests the infantile desire to be loved passively, together with a reluctance to separate from the mother.

The first Japanese Freudian psychiatrist, Heisaku Kosawa (1897–

1968), studied under Freud himself in 1932–33. Instead of subscribing to Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, Kosawa developed the idea of the Ajase complex, after the story of King Ajase in Buddhist literature. Kosawa postulated that the Ajase complex contains several elements, including the desire to become one with the mother (*amae*), resentment at 'betrayal' by the mother when she fails to conform to the child's expectations, and even reconciliation by the good grace of Buddha.⁷ Kosawa noticed in therapy with his Japanese patients that their resentment towards their mothers was stronger than their Oedipal resentment towards their fathers, and that the re-establishment of unity with the mother (*amae*) was the core of the therapy.⁸

When Japanese psychoanalysts reconstructed Western psychoanalysis to suit the Japanese mentality, in other words, some of them considered *amae* to be the key. Takeo Doi, for one—Doi is a critical disciple of Kosawa—insists that the Japanese must understand clearly, then overcome, their existing *amae* problems.⁹ When social anthropologist Chie Nakane writes that the Japanese social structure consists of vertical human relationships and that co-dependence between workers and their superiors is more common in Japan than solidarity between co-workers, she may not use the word *amae* but the relationship model she explores is rooted in the concept just the same.¹⁰

In 'The Story of My Unfortunate Mother', the mother needs to feel constantly protected and cared for by the people around her, especially by her children, who 'often felt that [their] obedience to her was tested'¹¹. She frequently contrives sickness to test her children, since the best scope for *amae* comes when she is sick and helpless; understandably she makes a great fuss about the most trivial illness. One of these instances is described in detail. She contacts her eldest son (away from home and preparing for an examination) by telegram—a sign of urgency—complaining of stomach trouble, and is delighted to witness his concern for her. The story teller on the other hand, the younger brother Hiroshi, is unconcerned about her sickness and goes out to play, leaving her bitterly disappointed and protesting tearfully 'you are surely not my child'.¹² She is also deeply resentful of her doctor's 'coldness' when he, too, does not take her sickness seriously. If her need for *amae* at any given time is satisfied, she is calm, otherwise she becomes anxious and shows her disapproval by anger, reproach, or tears. She cannot feel at ease unless she enjoys the single minded loyalty of those around her, and thus suffers an insatiable and endless compulsion to challenge their love for her.

Doi suggests that 'wherever the *amae* psychology is predominant

the conflicts and anxiety associated with separation are, conversely, lurking in the background.' The mother feels a deep anxiety over the possibility of a sudden separation from her children (behind which lurks an anxiety over the certainty of the ultimate separation through death). Without creating opportunities for *amae*, she cannot ameliorate the pain of that anxiety. Doi further suggests that 'the person who seeks *amae* often experiences frustration and usually, even when her/his need is satisfied, the satisfaction does not last indefinitely'. The source of that anxiety being deeply rooted in the unconscious, she is driven on an endless quest for *amae*. Unaware of what she is doing or why, she cannot make the effort necessary to bring it into consciousness. Doi's explanation of hysteria illuminates this kind of behaviour:

Although this might seem 'self-centered' in its attempt to focus attention on the self, it indicates not the presence of a true self but a fear that unless the subject behaves in this way she/he cannot be sure of her/his own existence at all.

V. E. Frankl, in his 'Existential Analysis', attributes some neuroses to a failure to discover meaning and responsibility in life. It is precisely this failure, which Frankl terms 'the Existential frustration',¹³ that is experienced by the mother in Tanizaki's story.

For all that, a person 'cannot possess a self without previous experience of *amae*', Doi argues, suggesting that *amae* begins during the labial stage 'before the establishment of the Oedipus complex' and that it 'should have an influence on subsequent stages of development'. It is likely that those children who can depend on their mothers and establish a good relationship with them during infancy are able to separate from their parents with assurance and independence. Those who fail in the parental relationship, however—or, more correctly, those who are failed by their parents—must suffer the distrust and anxiety which stem from the lack of a firm foundation to their lives. Doi cites the case of schizophrenia, 'where there is a latent desire for *amae* but no experience of relations with others involving *amae*'. 'From the outset', he says, 'such persons have lacked the soil in which a proper sense of *jibun* [self] could develop'.¹⁴

We do not know from Tanizaki's story the details of the mother's childhood, but we can presume that her infant period was far from satisfactory. Certainly she lived during what was an uncertain and difficult period historically, especially for women. Tanizaki wrote this story in 1921 and we can assume that the mother was born around the 1860s, at the end of the Edo era and the beginning of the Meiji era, when many aspects of Western civilisation were imported and

propagated throughout Japan and yet most Japanese women had little freedom to take any control over their lives. A well brought up daughter of a merchant, the mother has been raised knowing nothing of worldly matters and married at around twenty. Since marriages were arranged largely by the respective parents in those days, it is unlikely that she has had any say in deciding her husband. Judging from their having had a maid and the son's being a university student, the family is probably a rather wealthy, well educated one. Typically, a mother of that period would have spent most of her time bringing up her children and her life would have revolved around the lives of her offspring.

In Tanizaki's story, the mother's husband dies of cancer when she is forty five, around the start of the Taisho era (1912), and for the next five years she is described as having a happy life despite her being a widow. During the Taisho era many women were given the opportunity to choose an education and career, and even their own husbands. The elder son of the family in the story marries just such a modern girl, who after graduating from music school and becoming a well known pianist chooses him as her partner. Tanizaki notes the strong, independent personality of the wife, contrasting her modern life style with the mother's traditional way of life.

It is not hard to guess how difficult it must have been for a woman who had been permitted only a narrow role in society to find any meaning in life other than through her children, especially after her husband's death. While she appears satisfied, indeed even happy about her eldest son's marriage to the woman she has been tricked into believing she has chosen, inside herself a struggle rages at the thought of being separated from the one person on whom she depends. In order to engross her son she needs to neutralise the influence of his wife, since the wife constitutes a threat she cannot ignore. She is in a state of constant fear and uncertainty regarding the future, and even joins the couple on their honeymoon, a decision against which the other members of the family protest:

I thought, 'she should have had more sense than to disturb the couple on their honeymoon', but my Mother did not listen to me. This is the first time that Mother, who put such superstitious importance on habits or customs, did such a senseless thing. She might have been tempted by a devil. Thinking back on those days, we felt out of sorts at that time.¹⁵

Doi points out that *amae* and the need to reject any hindrance to achieving *amae* go hand in hand. When *amae* is present, discomfort is felt because of the fear that it might be disturbed.¹⁶

The mother in the Tanizaki story creates her own misfortune by joining the honeymooning couple. There are three possible means of transport from Atami to Kokufutsu, the place where the accident happens. Her son's suggestion to go by car or rickshaw is ruled out by her fear that the car might drop over the cliff where the road is rough. She also rejects the train, since she has already been sick in the train on the way to Atami. Instead she chooses the most perilous means of travel: they go by ship, although the ocean around Kokufutsu is notoriously dangerous and an evening departure makes it even more hazardous. Had the accident not happened, the potential for disaster—arguably even the likelihood of disaster—would have remained.

After the ship is wrecked, the mother is saved by somebody other than her son and taken to an inn. From that day, she changes dramatically, retreating neurotically into the darkest room to chant a sutra in front of her husband's tablet in the household shrine. Refusing every invitation, she remains ensconced in her retreat, only joining the family for meals and even then never taking part in the conversation. When occasionally during meals she is obliged to scurry back to her room, the children know it is because she suddenly feels like crying. At the compliments about her children she once received so happily and proudly, she smiles sadly, lowering her eyes in distress. Where once she had been sociable, talkative, and always in control of the family, after the accident she locks herself away in silent obedience, 'like a cat'. Where once she had had an admittedly neurotic energy for life, now she moves surely toward her death, waiting for it, her attitude one of surrender: a 'desire to follow her past husband, formed the keynote of her life'.¹⁷ Her mental condition deteriorates and her death follows soon after:

It was not so terrible while she was crying. The situation became unbearable after her tears had dried up. She had been living like a shadow, hardly eating anything, and she soon pined away and died. It was as if she had vanished. When she was dying, she said to the eldest brother and his wife and to us who were looking into her face, 'You children, don't come so close to me. Your Father is coming to meet me ...' and she left us, sweeping us away with her hand. That was her last word.¹⁸

Her spurning human relationships; her refusal to venture out of the house; her rejection of food—all are typically neurotic symptoms spelling out an unconscious attempt to take her own life. The phobia she once suffered about thunder, earthquake, and anything related to or suggestive of death turns around, as a desire for death replaces the fear

of it. 'Part of the reason for Mother's fear of death came from her desire to be dependent on her children', Tanizaki writes, clearly stating the connection between *amae* and the mother's fear of death.¹⁹ When she faces the cruel reality that her son's wife has come to occupy a more important position in his life than she does, her world collapses and life loses its meaning. Her need to depend on her children can no longer be satisfied; her anxiety regarding separation and the uncertainty of her existence proves only too well founded.

Tanizaki describes how the mother's anxiety over separation and concern for her own survival generally is deeply entrenched in her unconscious, and how hard it was for her weak ego to confront that problem:

The image of my Mother before she died was, as I said before, very sad. The whole existence of my Mother was like a sad melody. It is possible that Mother herself was not conscious of how deep that sadness was. Even though she had a chance to be conscious of it, she would have avoided it at all costs. Otherwise, her weak mind and body certainly could not have withstood the deep sorrow.²⁰

Had she been able to confront what remained an unconscious problem and to integrate it into her ego for examination, she might have avoided the disaster. Hayao Kawai, a distinguished Jungian psychologist, notes that this process, accompanied by pain and agony, is unbearably difficult. If the ego is not strong enough to bear the confrontation, moreover, there is always a danger that the person will commit suicide.²¹ Not having the courage to confront her psychic problems, the mother in the Tanizaki story surrenders.

Most women experience the progression daughter, wife, mother, grand-mother, at each stage undergoing a symbolic death and rebirth with attendant mental conflicts. When girls choose their partners they put their daughterhood behind them to share their lives with their husbands; when their children grow up and leave home, they cease mothering and allow their children to live their own lives. At the grand-mother stage, they must confront the prospect of ageing and dying. Through the death and rebirth they experience at different stages, their egos are strengthened gradually and they develop into mature human beings. In the case of the mother in the Tanizaki story, even when she becomes wife and mother she continues to display the attitude of a spoiled child, and her sons react to her need for *amae* by 'humoring' her.²² Unable to accept her age (she tries to look younger by dyeing her hair, for example), she plays the dual role of both mother and child. Not surprisingly, when it is time to let her son go, she cannot face

the prospect of being independent and clings to him, impelled by the forces at work in the depths of her unconscious. Psychic problems presenting as *amae* lead her to a downfall that begins with her psychological 'death' and ends with her physical death.

In 1921, before these issues had been widely discussed, Tanizaki was already using his artistic intuition to examine existential anxiety and related *amae* factors. Sei Ito, a Japanese literary critic and author, summed it up when he said that Tanizaki was a pioneer who awakened us to the uncertainty of our existence and tried to ensure our integrity as human beings by writing about existential fear and anxiety—and this, before the introduction of psychoanalysis and the arrival of European modern literature after World War I.²³ Tanizaki is an absorbing writer who found unprecedented opportunities to glimpse and to express the human psyche. If he is sometimes bizarre, sometimes shocking, he is also sometimes disturbingly revealing.

Notes

- 1 *Gunzo Nihon No Sakka* [Group of Japanese Writers] 8, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, Tokyo, 1991, hereafter *Gunzo*, p.332.
- 2 *Gunzo*, pp.29, 113–124.
- 3 Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Zenshu*, Vol. 7, Tokyo, 1967, hereafter *Zenshu*, pp.354–6.
- 4 *Kokugo Daijiten* [Grand Dictionary of the Japanese Language], ed. Haruhiko Kindaichi and Yasaburo Ikeda, Tokyo, 1978, p.47; *Gendai Kokugo Reikai Jiten* [Modern Japanese Dictionary with Example Sentences], ed. Oki Hayashi, Tokyo, 1985, p.30.
- 5 Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester, Tokyo, 1973, hereafter *Dependence*, p.28.
- 6 *Dependence*, p.7.
- 7 Keigo Okonogi, *Ajase Complex*, Tokyo, 1982, p.21.
- 8 Keigo Okonogi and Hayao Kawai, *Freud and Jung*, Tokyo, 1989, pp.180–1.
- 9 *Freud and Jung*, pp.181–2; *Dependence*, p.84.
- 10 Chie Nakane, *Tateshakai no Ningen-kankei* [Human Relationship in a Vertical Society], Tokyo, 1967, pp.70–97, 137.
- 11 *Zenshu*, p.354.
- 12 *Zenshu*, p.351.
- 13 Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch, London, 1946, p.102.
- 14 *Dependence*, pp.75, 7, 136–7, 139, 20.

- 15 *Zenshu*, p.362.
- 16 Takeo Doi, *Seishin-bunseki [Psychoanalysis]*, Osaka, 1967, p.205.
- 17 *Zenshu*, p.371.
- 18 *Zenshu*, p.372.
- 19 *Zenshu*, p.355.
- 20 *Zenshu*, p.348.
- 21 Hayao Kawai, *Complex*, Tokyo, 1971, p.133.
- 22 *Zenshu*, p.353.
- 23 *Gunzo*, pp.60, 114-5.