

Antony and Cleopatra: Fetishism and Decline in Tanizaki's *Naomi*

Although it may be an unintended artifact of translation, the Japanese title for *Naomi*, “Love of a Fool,” takes two distinct meanings in English: either Naomi is the fool whom Joji loves, or Joji is the fool *who* loves. These two interpretations refer to inverses of the same power relation, and encourage a reading that recognizes distinct, opposed stages of the text. In one, Joji patriarchally takes Naomi in, dominating her physically/mentally and trying to create a “fine, respectable woman” (*Naomi* 40). In the other, Naomi deceives, seduces, and degrades Joji, who becomes her (sexual) servant and supplicant.

Importantly, we must ask how the transition from one stage to the other is achieved in the narrative. It is my contention that *fetishism*, referring to both Joji's infatuation with/reverence of Naomi and Naomi's obsession with “things Western,” is Tanizaki's primary tool in (a) defining our narrator, (b) managing Joji's and Naomi's relationship, and (c) allegorizing Japan's increasing interest in Western ideas and fashions.

Joji, first and foremost, is a man *watching*. The narrative is often frozen, and framed by, his gaze, immediately apparent when he jumps into intricately detailed visual descriptions (p. 11, for instance: “she wore [. . .],” or p. 68 when he describes the countess's hands) or recounts, later on, his elaborate imaginings, which he insists were authentic enough to be “no different from the real thing” (*Naomi* 221). He admits his own scopophilia, constantly reminding us of Naomi's picturesque features and his appreciation thereof.

But Joji's fetishism borders on the pathological. We see signs of objectification early when he laments his “wrong decision” to take Naomi in, but keeps her around in hopes of flaunting her and admiring her physically. Later, our suspicions are confirmed when she leaves and he has bouts that he calls “attacks of hysteria” (*Naomi* 225) born of an overzealous and certainly unhealthy sexual obsession. On p. 205 we can pinpoint the precise object of his desire when he says that “the sight of her bare feet tempted me more than anything else.”

What does this have to do with the West? For one, Naomi's decline starts with Western dance, and is only promulgated by further advances into a pro-Western, “Modern Girl” subculture. So in a very direct way, Tanizaki uses his characters to show the destructive effect of baseless reverence. But more subtly, we can consider Joji and Naomi's relationship as parallel to that of traditional Japan and the West, with one fetishistically admiring the other, and ultimately (so the allegory goes) allowing obsessive admiration to

turn into domination. How different are Joji's objectification of Naomi and Naomi's superficial mimicry of Western fashion? Or Joji's tragic downfall at the hands of an oppressive, demanding infiltrator who whores herself out, and Japan's increasing subordination and humiliation by the United States, a country revered and detested for appearances and known (at least economically) for its promiscuity? Indeed, the love story here is a cautionary tale, not just of men and women and the taming of Antony by Cleopatra, but of nations and cultures. Fetishism, as Freud imagined and observed, begins as appreciation but mutates into something more sinister and self-effacing.

No wonder *Naomi* is so readable. It is a stirring (though often humorous) account with a practicable message of preservation, tradition, and caution in the face of sweeping sociopolitical change, written *for the people*. Doubtless Tanizaki did not want to abandon all things Western, but he certainly hoped to poke fun at (in sometimes graphic or powerful ways) over-eager countrymen whose cultural fetishism might destroy or debase aspects of Japanese national identity.

It is fitting, then, that as the narration concludes and our couple moves out of their "fairy-tale house" into something more Japanese, Naomi's suitors, demeanor, and appearance become all the more solidly Western. The new digs are but a small consolation in what must be regarded as a tragic ending. Indeed, it is an account worth laughing at, but only uneasily, because Joji might in fact be in love with Naomi, as he finally claims – and if in the face of his own pathetic subservience, and the seemingly obvious desolation of his spirit and character that accompanies it, he can convince himself he's in love, what is left of him? Nothing but *Naomi*.