

**The Chaste, Distressed Vamp: The Modern Hero's Quest for the Ideal Woman
in Natsume Sôseki's *Sanshirô* and Tanizaki Junichirô's *Naomi***

Maria Lourdes Muscado

ASIA 364, Modern Japanese Literature in Translation

Instructor: Dr. Christina Laffin

Teaching Assistant: Ms. Gergana Ivanova

December 15, 2008

Maria Lourdes Muscado

Dr. Christina Laffin

Ms. Gergana Ivanova

ASIA 364 (001)

15 December 2008

**The Chaste, Distressed Vamp: The Modern Hero's Quest for the Ideal Woman
in *Sanshirô* and *Naomi***

Written at the end of the Meiji period, Natsume Sôseki's *Sanshirô* appears to bare little resemblance to Tanizaki Junichirô's *Naomi*, which was written at the end of the Taishô period. However, the two novels encompass the fears of modern men and the rise of modern women. Despite the shifting era, both male protagonists pine for an ideal woman with traditional finesse and modern impulse. As their beloveds appear to transform from ingénues to damsels in distress to femme fatales, the quasi-heroes Sanshirô and Jôji struggle to understand Mineko and Naomi, who represent a means of escaping or transcending the rapidly changing modern times.

Sanshirô seems to scorn the typical country wife but still searches for her traditional qualities in the city women that he encounters. He is not completely ignorant of women's thoughts. Sanshirô decides against buying Omitsu a present as she "was sure to convince herself that he had something more in mind than gratitude" (Natsume 26). However, when it comes to Tokyo women, Sanshirô remains a spectator of their external beauty and fails to access their contradictory minds. The descriptions of his first encounter with the woman on the train, the girl with the fan, and the girl in the hospital room are lengthy and meticulous, and reveals Sanshirô's

tendency to focus on a woman's image as a means to pause and situate his own presence amid the bustling city. He seeks comfort in picturing these women within a restricted space—on a train, behind a fan, or inside a room—because they invoke feelings of domesticity and stagnancy. Moreover, when he meets Mineko outside Hirota's new house, Sanshirô illustrates that when he saw her “standing within this narrow enclosure [a square bit of land], [he] had a momentary insight: one should always view a flower cut, in a vase” (66). The flower symbolizes the traditional woman who is contained and observed. However, Sanshirô's traditional frame of thinking does inevitably fail to enclose the modern, restless subject.

Jôji in Tanizaki's *Naomi* also scorns yet craves aspects of the traditional woman. In the beginning of the novel Jôji outlines his standards for a neo-marriage, but later on looks forward to returning home from the office to see his wife “alone, reading a novel, knitting, listening quietly to the gramophone, or planting flowers in the garden” (Tanizaki 125). Compared to Sanshirô's ideal woman who is represented as a single flower in a vase, Jôji's ideal is a combination from various eras and regions. The young Naomi habitually gathers flowers “growing on a levee or by a country road” (15-16) into a bouquet for Mr. Kawai. Jôji's suggestion to throw out the wilted bouquets foreshadows his decision to dispose of the whorish Naomi. The young Naomi's promise of revitalized bouquets placed in water prefigures Jôji's plan to refurbish his marriage. His derision of the traditional lifestyle switches into an appeal before his wife: “I'd sell the Western furniture we'd been using and buy Japanese-style furniture instead” (166). After realizing that Naomi is no longer chaste, Jôji hopes to elevate her value through motherhood. He begs, “If we have a child—just one—we can be man and wife in the real sense” (165). Despite Jôji's modern impetus, his nostalgia for traditional values remains a factor that distinguishes him from the overly modern Naomi.

While remaining traditional in his outlook and expectations of women, Sanshirô is fearful of and attracted to the forwardness and complexity of the modern woman. After the advances of the woman on the train, he questions: “Were there supposed to be women like her in the world? Could a woman be like that, so calm and confident?” (Natsume 10). Mineko is also a walking contradiction. Professor Hirota characterizes her as calm and reckless, and explains that “[w]ith Ibsen women, it’s all out in the open. Mineko is reckless deep inside” (103). Although Sanshirô finds modern women incomprehensible and terrifying, he is attracted to the very essence that makes them unapproachable; thus, he summarizes his situation into three worlds.

Sanshirô’s three worlds can be categorized as follows: the obsolete world of the traditional woman; the escapist world of the academic, modern man; and the emerging world of the modern woman. He explicitly names his mother as belonging to the first world, and specifies Professor Hirota and Nonomiya among the “unfortunate” (Natsume 63) men with “unkempt beards” (63) residing in the second. However, in his description of the third world, he does not name anyone in particular. Rather he mentions that he “had spoken to one of [the beautiful woman], he had seen another twice” (63), which imply Yoshiko and Mineko respectively. Sanshirô’s vague and romantic account of the third world accentuates his isolation from this idealistic realm as well as his desire “to be the master of some part of this world” (63). Exploring the visual imagery and the significance of colour in *Sanshirô*, Jay Rubin argues, “Modern woman is aggressive and has forced men to play the passive role...Sôseki’s imagery is a reversal of the traditional scheme. It is the women who are bright (*mei*), and their light penetrates into the darkness (*an*) of the men that traditionally was female” (153). The narrator’s description of Sanshirô’s third world as “radiant and fluid as spring, a world of electric lights, of silver spoons, of cheers and laughter, of glasses bubbling over with champagne” (63) is a dreamy

misrepresentation of the new cultural space and the modern woman's role within it. Donald Keene describes the flirtatious, yet engaged, Mineko as "certainly less typical of Japan in 1908 than Sanshirô, but Sôseki apparently considered that she represented the wave of the future, the direction in which the new Japan was inexorably headed" (327). In a way, the exteriorly calm and internally reckless Mineko is a relatively uncomplicated precursor to Naomi.

Whereas Sanshirô prefers to analyze and simplify urbanization and modernization into distinct realms, Jôji ventures to create his own modern space and to fashion his own modern partner. However, Jôji's expectations are more fluid. Initially, he claims that he "wasn't interested in marrying a rich man's daughter or a fine, educated sort of woman" (Tanizaki 7). Then he confesses that "yet it was [his] intention...to bring [Naomi] up as a fine young woman" (22). Later on, he admits: "I didn't have a clear idea of what 'respectable' and 'fine' meant, but I must have been thinking of something vague and simplistic like 'a modern, sophisticated woman'" (40). Therefore, when the young Naomi promises, "I'll be the sort of woman you want" (34), she in fact offers a tentative promise to the flexible criteria of an undecided modern man. Jôji gradually lowers his standards. He proposes, "For the modern beauty, an intelligent, quick-witted expression and attitude are...important" (51), but then he settles for "simple vanity" (51). In addition, Tomi Suzuki contends:

Naomi...becomes a degraded version of the ideal of the modern 'new woman' [of the 1890s]. *Chigin no ai*, if not satirizes, the contemporary sociocultural phenomenon of the modern girl and modern boy [of the 1920s], whose 'freedom' and 'emancipation' are depicted as nothing more than the cheap products of the new consumer society" (167).

Therefore, Jôji's defense of failing to make Naomi spiritually beautiful appears to be a poor excuse for his materialistically uxorious behaviour. Naomi's ornamented demeanour seems to

be a physical manifestation of Sanshirô's third world—extravagant and celebratory.

The interrelationship of external modern allure and underlying traditional longing imposed on the ideal woman can be further explored in her shifting portrayal from ingénue to damsel in distress to femme fatale. As modern heroes, Sanshirô and Jôji envision and translate Mineko and Naomi as versions of these three literary archetypes. In both texts, the hero and the ingénue (representative of the modern man and the modern woman) begin at a similar inexperienced view of modernization, and still cling to past traditional values. Then, as quasi-hero and damsel in distress, the modern man asserts the position of rescuing his beloved. Finally, as disillusioned hero and femme fatale, the modern man cowers under the influence of the modern woman.

Being equally naïve, Sanshirô is drawn to the innocence and moral purity of the ingénue. A white complexion is a necessary component of his ideal woman. In “The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan”, Wagatsuma traces the symbolic implications of and prevailing preference for white skin. The article cites a 1965 qualitative study in which Japanese men and women in the United States and Japan associated whiteness with womanhood, chastity, moral virtue, and motherhood (Wagatsuma 417). Specifically, Sanshirô's disgust of “a girl in stark white makeup” (Natsume 27) and attraction for Mineko's complexion “as the only way for a woman's skin to be” (27) demonstrate his fixed ideas on genuine femininity. Although Rubin describes modern women as penetrating and dominating white light, Mineko is initially described as “uncomfortable in the glare, [holding] up a stiff, round fan to shade her eyes” (22). Thus, Mineko seems to be equally fearful of the new role of the modern woman. Modernity is more fittingly depicted as the poison travelling through the branches of the peach tree according to Hirota's reference to Leonardo da Vinci's experiment. As ingénue and potential hero, Mineko

and Sanshirô observe a cherry tree and how “[a] few worm-eaten leaves still clung to its branches” (68). In other words, both are helpless observers of decaying past ideals in the new cultural space.

Naomi and Jôji, on the other hand, portray a false ingénue and a false hero. Jôji recalls that as a child Naomi is “[i]ngenuous and naïve, shy and melancholy” (Tanizaki 102), and that “she’d reply docilely, and follow [him] anywhere” (8). In comparison, Jôji admits that he “was a gentleman only on the surface” (5), and “secretly used every opportunity to observe women closely” (6). He is not a hero, but a predator. Later on, he admits, “Being from the country, clumsy at social pleasantries, and awkward in dealing with people, I’d become shy and withdrawn...I’d married Naomi in the first place because I wanted to make her a beautiful woman, go out with her every day, and have people praise her” (58). In search for a modern mate, the modern man longs for someone through whom he will live vicariously. Her successes and shortcomings shall be his own. Jôji’s descriptions of Naomi’s eyes provide some insight into her true ferocity and chameleon-like nature. After her insolent behaviour at the Café El Dorado, Jôji succumbs to her innocent gaze: “What clear, liquid eyes they were! I wished for some way to crystallize those beautiful teardrops and keep them forever” (78). Eventually, the false ingénue shall reveal her true nature to the false hero when her unwholesome deeds become exposed.

The modern hero would then assume the role of saving his damsel in distress. In *Sanshirô*, however, the roles are not as distinct. During the chrysanthemum doll show, Mineko wants to leave and Sanshirô observes “in the soft crease of her eyelids some unfathomable meaning, and in that meaning a fatigue of the spirit, a slackness of the flesh, an appeal close to suffering” (Natsume 89). As a young woman living in the new era, Mineko is also undergoing a

coming of age. Her translation of “lost child” (93) into “stray sheep” (94) expresses her transformation. A lost child invokes fear, dependence, and helplessness, which are similar to the feelings of the lost girl searching the crowd for her grandmother. A stray sheep, on the contrary, connotes will, freedom, and deviance. Moreover, Mineko translates an immature human into a mature animal. The narrator describes that “it was the meaning of the *girl* who used them that eluded [Sanshirô]” (my emphasis; 94), and then “[h]er words cleared the mist, and she emerged, distinctly, a *woman*” (my emphasis; 94). Lamenting, Sanshirô reveals, “If only it had never happened!” (94). Mineko offers Sanshirô a glimpse of her introverted recklessness. However, the cowardly hero recoils into the second world among the other men who prefer “to avoid responsibility” (93). Thus, the modern woman remains an enigma.

Jôji’s quest to redeem Naomi from her wicked ways is a more characteristic—yet quixotic—version of the hero and damsel in distress relationship. Jôji regards his wife’s behaviour as a personal attack on his property and on his body. He states, “The precious, sacred ground of her skin had been imprinted forever with the muddy tracks of two thieves” (Tanizaki 161). In addition, after Hamada discloses Naomi’s role as a plaything among men, Jôji describes his reaction as similar to “the effect of a sharp scalpel slicing off a lump of putrid flesh” (193). As enamoured as Jôji, Hamada postulates, “Miss Naomi’s not a bad person. [Kumagai, Seki, and Nakamura have] been a bad influence on her” (155). Thus, Jôji remains resolute and decisive in saving his marriage and his wife. After his plans fail, Hamada commends Jôji’s “attempts to rescue her” (199). Jôji persists on his heroic venture, yet fails to see that his damsel in distress has been a femme fatale in disguise.

Compared to Naomi, Mineko appears as a timid version of the femme fatale. Nevertheless, she is depicted as one and more strongly in the end when Sanshirô fails to win her

love. Sanshirô describes that the expression of her eyes “went beyond bearable sweetness and became a violent stimulus. Far from sweet, it was excruciating” (66). He ponders, “There was a cruelty in the girl’s glance that made the one it fell on wish to play the coquette” (67). Not completely blameless, Mineko does inadvertently hurt Sanshirô. The narrator describes, “The touch of Mineko’s flesh was like a throb of pain in a dream” (147). Furthermore, Sanshirô reflects that he “had become the captive of a woman, he had surrendered himself...He did not know if he was being loved or laughed at, whether he should be terrified or contemptuous” (121). However, Sanshirô’s frustration is unwarranted given that he “had never considered” (158) thinking about the role and responsibility of being Mineko’s husband. Far from a black widow spider, Mineko is a highly sought after young woman who is both aware and apologetic of her actions among undecided men.

On the contrary, Naomi is the quintessential femme fatale. Jôji underestimates Naomi and makes the following claim: “In the past, a woman could get along without *an analytical mind*; but not any more. A woman who wanted to be ‘the equal of Westerners’ and a ‘fine woman’ wasn’t very promising if she had no *aptitude for systematic thinking and analysis*” (my emphases; Tanizaki 44). Naomi proves to possess the faculties of the most cunning of predators. Jôji becomes surprised that “a girl of nineteen would deceive [him] so audaciously, so craftily!” (149). Not simply an ornamental doll, Naomi is often implicitly compared to a snake shedding skin. Jôji recalls, “Naomi was in the habit of wearing [kimonos] against her skin, and we hardly ever laundered them” (38). Later on, he observes during their separation and her frequent visits that “[s]he picked up a silk crepe under-robe...twisted her body and let the muslin robe slide...like a discarded skin” (205). Jôji notices later on that “animal electricity” (47) emanates from his young wife’s eyes. He recalls that “[i]t seemed beyond belief that they were a woman’s

eyes. Glittering, sharp, and frightful, they still brimmed with a certain mysterious allure. And sometimes when she shot her angry glance at me, I felt a shudder pass through my body” (47). Naomi is able to manipulate the expression of her eyes according to the situation. She can appear innocent and remorseful in tears, or hold back anger and fury when scorned. When Naomi appears before Jôji in her Cinderella attire, Jôji is baffled and questions: “Was this a dream? If not, where had Naomi learned such magic? Where had she mastered sorcery?” (211). However, it is neither magic nor sorcery; rather, the femme fatale draws on her systematic, analytical skills to return home to her husband dressed shabbily at first so that her next visit is more extravagant and glamorous by comparison.

The modern hero persists in chasing after his ideal woman despite her transformations because the process is a form of escaping or transcending the challenges of present time and space. Sanshirô’s pursuit of Mineko is an escapist’s approach to modernity. The unbearable movement of bustling Tokyo fades in the background. His mother’s letters are unreturned. The dense lectures in the setting of higher education are inconsequential. The love of a woman becomes the ultimate goal. Examining Natsume’s other works, McClellan states, “In *Kôjin*... the protagonist claims that there are two other avenues of escape [besides death]: one is madness and the other is religion...For Sôseki...faith and madness are only theoretically possible means of escape; death is the only real one” (201). The scenes of death in *Sanshirô* are often related to women. Sanshirô witnesses the corpse of a young woman who allegedly commits suicide on the train tracks (Natsume 43). Upon seeing a child’s funeral procession, Sanshirô reflects on “a kind of anguish beneath the beautiful pleasure he felt from the living Mineko” (169). Death and suicide is a rather bold and drastic approach to dealing with modernization; the futile quest for a woman’s unrequited love offers a similar paralyzing effect for the cowardly Sanshirô.

Ultimately, Jôji's desperate and deranged mission to secure Naomi is an ironic attempt to transcend the physicality and superficiality of his modern lifestyle. In "Tanizaki and Poe: The Grotesque and the Quest for Supernal Beauty", Lippit claims:

Tanizaki came to identify ideal beauty with the beauty of the classical Japanese court lady, whose white face glows faintly in a dark, screened room like the fluorescent glow of fireflies at night. Glimpsed only momentarily, she is inaccessible, a dream woman existing only in one's imagination and separated in time and space. Although the essence of her beauty is also whiteness, it is no longer white flesh, but whiteness itself." (236)

Jôji's ideal woman plays a role beyond the chaste and loving wife. She is simultaneously a goddess and whiteness personified. In the eyes of the quasi-hero, she is the vehicle through which he can reach the ideal, Platonic realm. Jôji often describes his memories with Naomi in a dream-like manner. He expresses the exhilarating effect her kisses had on him as follows: "This gave me the delicious sensation of countless camellia petals, heavy, dewy and soft, cascading onto my face, and inspired a daydream in which my head was submerged in the petal's fragrance" (Tanizaki 78). On their honeymoon at Kamakura, he illustrates, "Moved to a tearful ecstasy, I wanted to drift away with Naomi to some uncharted, faraway world" (28). Despite the worldly and bodily aspects of Jôji and Naomi's relationship, Jôji seems to envision a spiritual and transcending quality that is worth defending.

The modern hero's attempt to regard the modern woman as shifting stock characters—ingénue, damsel in distress, and femme fatale—demonstrates the wrestling of traditional and modern, and nostalgia and progress. The results look grim for the modern man. However, if the purpose of the modern hero is to either escape or transcend the here and now through the pursuit of an ideal woman, then Sanshirô and Jôji are essentially victorious in their quest.

Works Cited

- Keene, Donald. *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era, Fiction*. New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1984.
- Lippit, Noriko Mizuta. "Tanizaki and Poe: The Grotesque and the Quest for Supernal Beauty." *Comparative Literature* 29.3 (Summer 1977): 221-240.
- McClellan, Edwin. "Introduction to Sôseki." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22 (Dec., 1959): 150-208.
- Natsume, Sôseki. *Sanshirô*. Trans. Jay Rubin. New York: Perigree Books, 1982.
- Rubin, Jay. "Sanshirô and Sôseki." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 36 (1976): 147-180.
- Suzuki, Tomi. "Chapter 7: Allegories of Modernity: Parodic Confession in Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's Fool's Love." *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996: 151-174, 216-219.
- Tanizaki, Jun'ichirô. *Naomi*. Trans. Anthony H. Chambers. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Wagatsuma, Hiroshi. "The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan." *Daedalus* 96. 2, Color and Race, (Spring 1967): 407-443.