
Japan's modernisation as portrayed by the definitions of poverty in three literary writings

For countless generations, those members of society who are fortunate enough to have been born into stable lifestyles have seen the horrors of poverty second-hand through art in all forms. Though they can look upon and consider these depictions and realizations with disgust and revulsion, their empathy can never progress past a certain threshold. However, though additional interpretations are less common, poverty is not a concept exclusively married to one's affluence; a more general definition of poverty simply refers to a "deficiency of necessary or desirable ingredients [and] qualities" (dictionary.com), extending the reach and interpretation of poverty to that of more esoteric topics. Higuchi Ichiyo's *Growing Up*, Fukuzawa Yukichi's "Excerpts from 'Good-Bye Asia' (1885)" and Natsume Souseki's "The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan" all deal with poverty, but in different forms that progress in a chronological manner correlating with Japan's process of modernization. The monetary poverty depicted in *Growing Up* inspired and led to the spiritual poverty dealt with in "Excerpts from 'Good-Bye Asia' (1885)", eventually leading to the existential poverty of "The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan"; though each form differs in terms of rhetoric and semantics, all are equally detrimental and devastating.

Although technically the work appeared about a decade after Fukuzawa's essay, considering the time frame that Higuchi was alive during and her status as "the last flowering of Tokugawa literature" (*Growing Up* 70), *Growing Up* is a fictionalized account of the

monetary poverty that laid the groundwork for the outcropping of spiritual poverty that was to come. Portraying an environment where "one hears no rumors of rich men" (Higuchi 70), *Growing Up* paints a bleak landscape of monetary poverty. The most blatant and widely recognizable form of poverty, the depiction of "rows of low tenements, ten and twenty to the row, their roof lines sagging, their front shutters carelessly left half open" (Higuchi 70) strikes a familiar chord, as incarnations of a similar scene consistently appear throughout the ages. Common societal effects of monetary poverty rear their heads as well. Due to limited exposure to outside influences and lifestyles, Midori easily follows in her sister's footsteps, Chokichi demonstrates a predilection towards taking his father's place when he polices the festival and Sangoro is already in the routine of doing odd jobs alongside his father to help support the family. Violence runs rampant in the vicious youth street gangs, and Shota, the only child who "had money and...was an engaging lad no one could dislike" (Higuchi 72) ends up dejected and somber, with "one seldom hear[ing] [his] singing" (Higuchi 110). Monetary poverty often digs a hole that is nigh impossible to get out of, with those who unwillingly participate in it "reconcil[ing] themselves to what [has] to be" (Higuchi 72). Treated with derision by the rich, many succumb to the belief that their lifestyle and fate are inevitable and can't be helped, as demonstrated by *Growing Up* considering the fact that no character strays from their prescribed course. Anxious for any chance to break out, individuals are likely to jump ship to any passing vessel, contributing to a spiritual poverty that Fukuzawa Yukichi was an unknowing proponent of.

The poverty of "Excerpts from 'Good-Bye Asia' (1885)" is one of spiritual dearth. Not spiritual in the sense of religion, but in the sense of personal faith and strength. Faced with a violent and striking exposure to the West and the modernity it represented, "Excerpts from 'Good-Bye Asia' (1885)" explicitly encourages Japan to throw up its hands in terms of

cultural integrity. Firmly espousing the "futility of trying to prevent the onslaught of Western civilization" (Fukuzawa), present nowhere is an impetus to stay the course and keep fighting. "Cast[ing]...lots with civilized nations of the West" (Fukuzawa) does not bespeak of a steadfast corrective course of action, but rather a surrender that gambles on a lucky realization of chance. Comparing the West and the spread of civilization it engendered to "the spread of [a] communicable disease" admits that the occurrence is deplorable, but indulges in pessimism and admits that there is no "effective way of preventing it" (Fukuzawa). "Float[ing]...in the same ocean of civilization, sail[ing] the same waves, and enjoy[ing] the fruits and endeavors of civilization" (Fukuzawa) eliminates all measures of Japanese agency and idealizes an easy-going, care-free assimilation process that is neither probable nor conducive to personal improvement. Spiritual poverty of this nature takes away pride, hope, and efficacy. By encouraging a populace to blatantly disregard the natural cultural progression of their own nation and join the ranks of culturally invasive foreign forces, the implication is that the populace's own culture never had value or worth to begin with. However, due to the monetary poverty that large portions of the population had experienced (and that Higuchi wrote about), the spiritual poverty that was occurring was not readily perceived. In fact, those who still possessed a desire to stay true to their culture were mocked and ridiculed for "[citing] [neo-Confucian] precepts of humanity, righteousness, decorum and knowledge", "show[ing] their ignorance of truth and principles", and "remain[ing] arrogant and show[ing] no sign of self-examination" (Fukuzawa). However, this ignorance of the spiritual poverty that was present would lead to an existential poverty dealt with by Natsume Souseki.

Pushed on by proponents such as Fukuzawa, Japan "had never experienced any foreign influence as intense as that of the sudden influx of Western culture" (Souseki 318).

Trying desperately to adhere to every example the West offered, Japan became "'externally motivated', forced to assume a certain form as the result of pressure applied from the outside" (Souseki 318). Having "no choice but to develop in unnatural ways...[and] leap[ing] ahead from one desperate round to the next", existential poverty occurred when the notion began to appear that "Japan [would] not be able to survive as Japan" (Souseki 319). Saying farewell to Asia ensured the Japanese would "feel out of place...like uninvited guests" (Souseki 320). Existential poverty rears its head when an entity fails to continue having a sense of a justified place in the world. In the midst of a confusing and dramatic adjustment period, Japan didn't feel comfortable as a nation on its own terms or as a nation furiously trying to emulate its peers. Perceived as "a sense of emptiness, of dissatisfaction and anxiety" (Souseki 320), existential poverty leads to extreme malaise and a crippling lack of self-worth, inspiring a nation to nearly have to "fight back...tears" (Souseki 321). Despite any noble efforts otherwise, those who are existentially poor are seen as pitiful and desperate by those who are internally motivated, grasping at straws in a manner most futile in order to compete. Reconciling to the fact that one "can only view [the] future with pessimism" (Souseki 322) establishes existential poverty as the most disheartening form of all.

Using poverty as a term to denote a shortage of that which is necessary or desirable shows that poverty is present in different forms across the pantheon of Japanese literature. Although monetary poverty is the most noticeably present in our society, spiritual and existential poverty are more present than many would care to consider and are nearly as harmful. However, monetary poverty can quickly set off a chain reaction ending in existential poverty as seen above, and the equation is just as easily communicable the other way. Perhaps, as the Japanese are fond of saying, "it cannot be helped".

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