



SEÇÃO: LITERATURA

The Dichotomy Christianity – Japaneseness: Shusaku Endo's autobiographical novel *The Samurai*

A dicotomia cristianismo – japonidade: a autobiografia O Samurai, de Shusaku Endo

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to demonstrate briefly how Shusaku Endo, the noted Japanese author of *Silence*, stresses his Japanese identity over his Roman Catholic religion in novel *The Samurai*. This preference has unfortunately been ignored by Western literary critics who have instead opted to stress the importance of his religious beliefs in his fiction.

Keywords: christianity; japaneseness; coloniality; colonial wound; imperial wound.

Resumo: O propósito deste estudo é mostrar brevemente como Shusaku Endo, o famoso autor japonês de *Silêncio*, enfatiza a sua identidade japonesa por cima da sua religião católica no romance *O Samurai*. Esta preferência tem sido, infelizmente, ignorada por parte dos críticos literários ocidentais que como alternativa enfatizam a importância da religião do escritor na sua ficção.

Palavras-chave: cristianismo; japonidade; colonidade; ferida colonial; ferida imperial.

Introduction

Other than from a religious perspective, not enough has been written about Shusaku Endo's fiction (1923-1996). He is the Japanese author of *Silence*, a celebrated 1966 novel about Jesuits in sixteenth-century Japan. The approach of the religious studies about the man and his work has been mostly shaped by the authors' Christian beliefs, whether Catholic or Protestant. While Endo considered himself a Catholic writer, his prose not always harmonizes with his religion; if anything, it appears to manifest certain identity ambivalence that spiritual critics seem not to discern or simply ignore.

In a previous study, I explore how Endo, primarily through characterization, reveals to what extent he seems to favor his "Japaneseness" over his Christianity in *The Sea and Poison* (1958), an earlier novel inspired by the Japanese experiments in human vivisection on American POWs during WWII. This fictional work is also an attempt to delve into the unconscious to determine to what degree it impacts human behavior. I believe that the outcome of my analysis sets the groundwork for a better understanding of the behavior that Padre Rodrigues and Kichijiro, *Silence's* two main characters, exhibit. For example, Rodrigues's reaction before stepping



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on the *fumie* (a likeness of Jesus Christ) can also be explained as an unconscious reaction, one elicited by an extraordinary situation.

Now, a later work, *The Samurai* (1980), not only strengthens the conclusions of my earlier study, but I believe that it also sheds light on the peculiar way that Endo viewed himself as a Catholic Japanese. The plot is based on the seventeenth-century diplomatic mission to Nueva España (today's Mexico) composed of low-ranking Japanese noblemen whose purpose was to establish commercial ties with the Spanish colony. It will therefore be the purpose of this paper to reveal some of Endo's internal conflicts as voiced by his characters or alter egos in the novel and to provide a better understanding as to what psychologically transpires in *Silence*. Before that discussion, however, I think that some succinct background is in order.

Shusaku Endo was not born into the Catholic faith, nor did he choose it from volition. His mother, having converted to Catholicism, her sister's faith, after her divorce from Endo's father, had him baptized at the age of eleven, an event with little impact on his life at the time. Yet years later, he reflects on his conversion thus:

it dawned upon me for the first time that Christianity was like a western suit that [I was made to] wear while growing up... offered from the fact that this western suit did not fit. How often have I thought of throwing away this suit! But I was unable to discard this western suit because it was given to me by those who loved me" (CHUANG, 2007, p. 211).

As we shall see, this uneasiness with Christianity threads *The Samurai*.

Catholicism was introduced to Japan by the Jesuit (Saint) Francis Xavier in 1549, at a time when European colonial expansionism was in full swing. His arrival was not coincidental given that the Christian religion has always walked hand in hand with European colonialism and imperialism. For example, Catholic Spain and Protestant England in modernity and the United

States in postmodernity.

According to Walter Mignolo, Euro-American colonialism and imperialism have inflicted wounds in poorer countries the outcome of which is coloniality (a discriminatory discourse in the colonized or impacted area that remains prevalent in the socioeconomic structure of postcolonial societies; it is reflected in their social orders and forms of knowledge). It is consequently the living legacy of colonialism. But, although the outcome of colonialism and imperialism is the same, colonial wounds are different to imperial wounds. India, for instance, having been colonized by the British, suffered a colonial wound; the Chinese, though never colonized, suffered an imperial wound because of their defeat in the Opium Wars against the British.

Japan too was never colonized, not out of indifference by the European powers but mostly because, since the Meiji Restoration, the country became a military power (the first non-European nation to defeat a European nation, Russia, in modern times), an industrialized country and, like its European counterparts, an imperial colonial power itself. Moreover, in my view, another important factor was the Tokugawa Shogunate's decision early in the seventeenth century to radically abolish Christianity in the islands. Such was not an arbitrary decision, but one based on well-founded suspicions as Justo L. González explains regarding Xavier's approach to conversion:

Xavier and his fellow missionaries did not make a clear distinction between European culture and the Christian faith. When their converts were baptized, they were given "Christian"—that is, Portuguese—names, and encouraged to dress in Western clothes. Many of these converts actually believed that when they accepted baptism they became subjects of the King of Portugal. For similar reasons, the cultured and the powerful in the various countries that the missionaries visited viewed Christianity as a foreign influence, undermining both traditional culture and the existing social order (p. 479).²

Had the Tokugawa not banished Catholicism, it is quite feasible that Japan would have fallen,

² Frantz Fanon holds a similar view in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen" (p. 7).

like the Philippines, into Spanish hands. (Not surprisingly, the Philippines is the only Catholic country in Asia and one of the most Catholic countries in the world.) The Iberian threat, coupled with their plausible knowledge of the natives' fate in the New World at the hands of the Spaniards, strengthened Japanese xenophobic resolve.³

This attempt at European infiltration through religion failed, though some 300,000 Japanese were converted; consequently, it does not qualify as an imperial wound. But, what occurred much later does. I am referring to Navy Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853 arrival with a small fleet in Tokyo harbor demanding commercial trade with the U.S. The Japanese, having no navy with which to answer the threat behind the demand, relented. Christian worship was immediately reinstated. The outcome of Perry's intrusive action caused Japan an imperial wound, one that would produce disastrous consequences in the century that followed.

Shusaku Endo is shaped by the Western policies that came with the Meiji Restoration period (1868-1912) that followed the fall of the Tokugawa. As mentioned, parental divorce and Christianity, Western constructs, help define his early years. As a young man after the war, he became interested in French Catholic writers and studied at the University of Lyon. Much like Frantz Fanon, with whom he coincided at the same institution, Endo bore the French disdain toward people of color—to a greater extent, because of the Japanese role in WWII. It may not be coincidental that Fanon and Endo published works with similar titles during this period: *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *White Man/Yellow Man* (1955). But whereas Fanon became aware of the coloniality victimizing him and his people, and rejected it ("[There are] quite simply instances where the educated black man suddenly finds himself rejected by the civilization he has nevertheless assimilated." [p. 73]), Endo, on

the other hand, spent his writing career trying to make his "western suit" fit. A possible explanation is that his translated work, particularly *Silence*, sold very well in the West—such success may be partially attributed to his acknowledgement by renowned figures like novelists Graham Greene and John Updike, publisher Peter Owen, and film director Martin Scorsese who recently adapted *Silence* for the screen.

Accompanied by a Spanish Franciscan interpreter, Father Luis Sotelo, Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga headed the 1613 mission to Nueva España that inspired *The Samurai's* plot. In the book, "Tsunenaga" is dropped from Hasekura's name; Sotelo becomes Father Velasco. It is the interaction between the two that allows readers to grasp the mindsets of a Japanese samurai and a Catholic missionary of the period. Through a Socratic approach, Endo lays bare not only the *pro et contra* of two opposite perspectives of life and death, but also presents us with what must have been his life-long conundrum: to simultaneously be Japanese and Christian.

Early in the book, Endo establishes the connection between Christianity and conquest. Velasco is portrayed as a religious warrior, a descendant of politicians and conquistadores, who views "the spreading of the gospel in [Japan] as a battle" (18). European disdain and mistrust toward people of color permeate his stream of consciousness as he repeatedly concludes his thoughts with derogatory and animalizing remarks about the Nipponese. For example, "these people are like ants. They will try anything!" or "God had use for all men, but the Japanese used only those who could be of benefit to them" (24). (Endo uses the "ant" simile eight other times throughout the novel in reference to the Japanese.) Having revealed once before his real motive for remaining in Japan, Velasco concludes the first chapter with this encapsulating thought: "I wish to have

³ It is safe to say that, along with Japanese knowledge of the treatment meted out to the "converted," another possible reason that kept the Spaniards from colonizing Japan was that they did not see financial benefits for such a venture. According to Fernando Iwasaki Cauti: La evangelización de los Andes y el Japón durante el siglo XVI demuestran de manera rotunda que la intervención militar y los beneficios económicos fueron más eficaces que la fe a la hora de mover montañas. Ello implica admitir que las derrotas y la ausencia de riquezas marcaron los límites de la evangelización, donde el caso del Japón curiosamente es compatible con el de los pueblos americanos de cultura menor que nunca fueron reducidos militarmente (araucanos, acomas, omaguas, chiriguano, apaches, etc.). (p. 256).

the position of Bishop...I alone can do battle with these cunning, heathen Japanese" (35). This last statement reflects the sly "Oriental" stereotype.

The next chapter continues with more revelations about the missionary's character: he ties his hands at bedtime to keep from masturbating, mentally accuses the Jesuits of "ugly jealousy" toward him and his monastic order and asks God to make him "a rock for these wretched Japanese saints" (p. 44). Endo then remarks that "the missionary did not realize that this was not a prayer, but rather a curse upon those who had wounded his pride" (p. 44). So much for self-denial and brotherly love from the man who is to convert the Japanese to the true religion.

On the voyage to the New World, Velasco tries to convert the accompanying Japanese merchants through questionable means. In a conversation with one of the envoys, he is questioned about his proselytizing to the merchants to which he admits that "in Nueva España, even people from foreign lands are welcomed as Christians. But if they aren't Christian, they can make little headway in their business negotiations" (p. 73). The envoy, after asking a couple of penetrating questions and labeling him a "clever schemer," concludes: "It makes no difference to [the merchants] whether there is a God or not. Most Japanese feel the same way" (p. 75). Later, Velasco hears a voice, as Rodrigues does in *Silence*, that indicates this flawed thinking: "to baptize men who do not believe in the Lord, for your own benefit, is a blasphemy and profanation. It is an act of arrogance" (p. 146).

Once in Nueva España, the Japanese witness what Christianity and "civilization" has brought the natives — a life of misery and slavery. Velasco, an accomplice to his country's depredations, justifies it all in the name of God — similar scathing remarks sprinkle the text:

Missionary work resembles the conquest of a foreign land. At times one has to close one's eyes to certain things for the sake of sharing the gospel. The conqueror Cortez landed here and with only a handful of soldiers he captured and killed multitudes of Indians. But we must not forget that as result of that sacrifice, today

countless Indians have come into contact with the word of our Lord (p. 97).

Envoy Matsuki Chusaku later denounces the Spanish/Catholic reality to Velasco: "[Nueva España] would have lived in peace if Spanish ships had not come. Your version of happiness has disrupted this country. Do you intend to treat Japan [likewise]?" (p. 113). Indeed, upon their return to the islands, Japanese envoys must have given testimony on the relationship between religion and pitiless colonization, thereby strengthening the Shogunate's resolve to eradicate the foreign religion's threat at home.

The "swamp" is a motif often employed by Endo in some of his novels. In *Silence*, Ferreira recognizes as futile his attempt to bring Christianity to Japan: "the sapling I bought quickly decayed to its roots in this swamp" (p. 161). The metaphor has been interpreted as that Christianity must be presented differently to the Japanese if it ever is to take hold there. Yet, in *The Samurai*, we get a different take on what Endo means by "swamp" or "marshland"— "the samurai could not abandon the faith revered by his father and his uncle. That would be tantamount to betraying his own flesh and blood, betraying the marshland [whence he hailed]" (p. 153). Such is Endo's dilemma: though he must reluctantly wear that ill-fitted suit (Catholicism) inherited from his mother and aunt, his compatriots will not do so since they cannot betray their ancestor's beliefs and traditions, those that so characterize that marshland they call *Nihon* 日本. It is difficult to neglect that, whereas Endo was Christian in a Shinto-Buddhist country that acknowledges him as one of its own, he was shunned by the French whose religion he shared and whose literature he studied and imitated in his writings. Like Fanon, he too must have felt and understood the coloniality of power as it particularly impacts the colonized, the postcolonized, and people of color in Europe.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Endo begins to deviate from historical facts to mostly fiction. Whereas it is true that Velasco (Sotelo) returned to Japan after a stint in the Philippines, was captured and burnt at the stake in 1624,

it is improbable that he was given a choice to apostatize because this option was not offered to Christians until 1629 — as the Jesuit missionaries did in *Silence*, he would have probably apostatized given the choice. Most revealing, however, is that Velasco, while awaiting his execution, begins two consecutive paragraphs in his stream-of-consciousness narration with the phrase “The fear of death” (p. 254). It appears that Endo, by including this repetition, tries to summarize what underlies the need for those religions that promise an afterlife. It is this fear that primarily maintains faith and gives many a purpose for living. Yes, Japanese are also afraid of death, but their beliefs and pragmatism do not allow for such a speculation. Tanaka, a Japanese envoy in the novel, expresses it best: “To live again after death —how could anyone believe such a thing?” (p. 174). Why, then, did Velasco, a self-serving manipulator, return and run the risk of execution? A possible answer may be zealotry.

Translator Van C. Gessel, in his Postscript to *The Samurai*, states that “virtually everything about Hasekura in the novel is true” (p. 269). Well, perhaps everything is true but his death. Endo has him executed for having become a Christian. However, as far as can be determined, his passing remains a mystery, although it has been written that “he died of illness in 1622, but the location of his grave is not known for certain” (New World Encyclopedia). Another of Gessel’s oversights pertains to the delegation’s transatlantic voyage: “The group of twenty or so Japanese who sailed from Veracruz were [sic] probably the first of their countrymen to make the journey across the Atlantic Ocean” (p. 269). This observation stands counter to Endo’s own narration (“about thirty years ago, some young men from Kyushu came to España as Christian emissaries, just like you.” (p. 150); he is borne out by history: “The four young lords were between fourteen and fifteen years of age when they departed [in February, 1582]. Landing in Lisbon in August, 1584, the young emissaries from Kyushu spent the next twenty months on a triumphal tour of Portugal, Spain, and Italy” (LACH, 1994, p. 689-90).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Endo confesses that *The Samurai* is “an autobiographical novel”: “in the life of Hasekura and the manner of his death I have expressed my present state of mind” (*The Samurai* 272). Based on this confession and on what has been presented here, Endo seems to have grappled his entire life with his “Japaneseness” and his inherited religion. Father Velasco, just as the Christian characters in *The Sea and Poison*, rarely reveals any quality that would entice Japanese readers to explore Christianity. The samurai, on the other hand, embodies all that is noble and honorable about that society. Endo, like Hasekura, became Catholic to achieve the expectations of others and, though he never renounced the imposed religion, he saw in his own ethnicity a moral superiority that atoned for the longstanding, U.S.-inflicted, imperial wound. He, like most of his countrymen, seems to have understood and condoned the Tokugawa Shogunate’s preventive decision.

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