



Japan, Camerakarrie

Breaking into Japanese Literature/Identity: *Tatema*e and *Honne*

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ABSTRACT: Due to the application of Euro-centered methods of interpretation, literary criticism has overlooked key social aspects that are characteristic of Japanese literature. Among these much-neglected characteristics one can include the paired concepts *tatemae* and *honne*. By incorporating those concepts into a reading of Japanese texts, the reader can discover social issues previously unseen. Banana Yoshimoto's novel *Kitchen* is used to illustrate the different interactions of *tatemae* and *honne*.

KEYWORDS: Japanese, literature, interpretation, *tatemae*, society, Banana Yoshimoto.



Perhaps one of the greatest problems that non-Japanese readers encounter when approaching a Japanese literary text is the assumption that instruments of interpretation created in the West are universal and can therefore be applied to any text, regardless of the fact that Asian works, and Japanese texts in particular, are grounded in a different cultural reality from the ones for which European and US systems of interpretation were developed. Richard Hoggart stresses this fact in his article "Los estudios culturales contemporáneos: literatura y sociedad":

En cierto sentido la mayor parte de la literatura, sino toda, puede decirse que está comprometida con su sociedad. Esta afirmación puede parecer virtualmente obvia. Pero sus consecuencias son tan diversas como complejas; difieren de un período a otro y de un país a otro [...] Esta tradición pretende que la buena literatura puede revelar una sociedad únicamente si—y el requisito es importantísimo—aprendemos a leerla debidamente y no tratamos de utilizarla para fines externos. (Hoggart, 1974: 187-188).

However, due to Euro-centered approaches used to interpret literature, the world has understood Japanese texts from a point of view that can do little to explain their native cultural manifestations and that equally fails to explain the uniqueness of these literary works. In his article "Ethnocentrism and the Very Idea of Literary Theory," Patrick Hogan argues how this Euro-centered view has prevailed in literary criticism:

Before setting out on this project, I realized that few people in literary theory or comparative literature had much familiarity with non-Western literary theories, and fewer still had research expertise in the field. Nonetheless, I was surprised to find that many of my friends and colleagues not only knew nothing at all about the topic, but actually found it difficult to understand what non-Western literary theory might be. On hearing that College Literature was doing a special issue on "non-Western literary theory before European colonialism", virtually everyone's first reaction was, "Oh, you mean Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak". When I repeated that it was non-Western theory before European colonialism, I was, more often than not, faced with looks of blank incomprehension. (Hogan, 1996: 1).

This lack of understanding of a non-Western literary theory is equally perceived in psychoanalytical approaches that have idealized Western societies as models and assume that the Western construction and perception of the self is universal: “Cuando miramos un poema psicoanalíticamente, se le considera como si fuera un sueño o como si algún paciente ideal, tendido en el diván, se hubiera puesto a hablar” (Holland, 1996: 163). Because of the premises that often underlie Euro-centered interpretive methodologies, Japanese social constructs and interactions have become invisible to literary critics. The result is a current of criticism that, although undeniably valuable, fails to illuminate certain significant areas that enrich one’s understanding of Japanese literature. Two of such cultural constructs are “*tatema*” and “*honne*” (建前 と本音). Both have constituted a social barrier for most foreigners in Japan and have become the source for a great deal of prejudice against the Japanese. At the same time, they have been ignored by Euro-centered social criticism because they are uniquely Japanese. Until recently, social sciences have studied them and, thus, have begun to understand the way in which the dichotomy *tatema-honne* works and permeates the world view of the Japanese, their literature and, ultimately, their identity:

Japanese literature has yielded very slowly to modern critical methods, in part because of a certain conservatism in the field but also because of difficulties in applying critical approaches developed in the study of European literature [...] Are Japanese perceptions of the self, and consequently of the role of the narrative "I", really alien to the European consciousness or can we find European texts that do anything that a Japanese text might do and vice versa? Are there really entire rhetorical categories and narrative strategies in Japanese which do not have analogs in the European languages? (Naff, 2000: online).

Language-based perceptions of a reality easily challenge the assumption that all societies have a universal narrative that includes the same basic rhetorical patterns. Contemporary criticism has argued that Japanese, as a language, posits several problems for interpretation:

Like all great literary traditions, the important forms in which the Japanese have written, including fiction, drama, and poetry, remain intimately bound to the ever-shifting possibilities of the Japanese language. Written Japanese differs so much from English in terms of syntax, grammar, and rhetorical strategies that the best of translations often constitute a brilliant paraphrase. (Rimer, 1999: 12).

Thus, it is not far-fetched to think that Japanese, a language that allows temporal conjugations for adjectives in the way in which English does for verbs, has created a uniquely different perception of reality that is manifested in its literature. What aspects have shaped the singular Japanese cultural differences? A brief look into Japanese history might help in answering this complex cultural question.

Brief History of Japanese Social Behavior

The history of Japan helps understand why the Japanese language manifests singular cultural characteristics that have been invisible to the West. First, although Japanese was spoken in the different islands that constitute the territory of Japan today, ancient Japan was not a unified country, but a multitude of small “kingdoms.” The Japanese did not regard those “kingdoms” as subdivisions of the same political territory; they were considered independent countries, as the word 国 (*kuni*, country), used to refer to them, implies. Researchers speculate that this strong division and the surrounding sea, a natural obstacle to abandon the islands, contributed to the development of social strategies to keep harmonious relationships within the territory.

In addition to maintaining peace in a divided land, their ancient ways of life also explain why the Japanese manifest social particularities. In his book *Nihonjin no Koudouyoushiki*, Hiroyuki Araki (1973) discusses two principles that existed in Japan as early as the year 300, which were “Bokuchiku to Noukoubunka” or “cattle culture” and “agriculture.” Araki believes that the basic culture of raising cattle led to the individualistic society of nomads, a principle termed “the male principle of individualism” (Araki, 1973: 23). He also believes that agriculture, in contrast, developed social cohesion, or “the female principle of the group”:

In the cooperative society of agriculture, where food production is imperative for survival, no individual impulse is allowed. Group members were to live in a relationship of interdependency, strengthening their sense of solidarity in community tasks, rituals, and other requirements. This worldview restricted individual urges. It was the group principle [...] If one visualizes nomads wandering in open territory looking for pastures, it will be rather easy to perceive that they are more individualistic when compared to those who cultivate the fields. (Araki, 1973: 24-25, our translation).

Community living implies the development of social skills. Agriculture called for leadership and specialization (each member in the group had to learn how to perform a specific task efficiently). Because of several factors that included age, experience, physical strength, and ability, a specific person gained prestige in each group and that high social standing was passed onto his descendants. Thus, each village or ムラ (*mura*) became a restricted circle under the rule of a leader. The frontiers that divided villages were not geographical or political as much as they were psychological; the group was perceived as the whole universe (Araki, 1973: 39) and everyone outside the circle was regarded as a threat to the stability of the community, the outsider or *sotomono* / *gaijin*. The severe penalties in the exclusion policy of 1633 manifest how this suspicion of “foreigners” has remained a staple in the psychology of the Japanese:

The order of 1633 in the form of a memorandum addressed to the two Governors of Nagasaki by the Roju Sakai Tadakatsu and three other high officers of the Bakufu. Its main provisions (there are seventeen articles in all) are as follows:

1. It is strictly forbidden for any vessel without a valid license to leave Japan for a foreign country.
2. No Japanese subject may leave for a foreign country in a vessel without a valid license.
3. Japanese subjects who have resided abroad shall be put to death if they return to Japan.

(Sansom, 1963: 36).

The fact that closed communities sometimes benefited from visits of an outsider, or the anxiety of ignoring who the outsider was (for this person could be a leader in a different village), created a sense of ambivalence in the way in which the Japanese villagers treated visitors. The basic reaction of the group was rejection, yet that visitor had to be respected if s/he was in fact the ruler of a neighboring country.

In addition to the coming of outsiders into the group, friction among its members also threatened the stability of the village, a situation that was more likely to occur. If two or more villagers engaged in a dispute, the situation would affect the production of food and, consequently, disturb the entire village. Araki stresses that, due to the female principle of the group, the Japanese had to create a cultural mechanism to guarantee unity in the village when its members engaged in disputes. The outbreak of a quarrel had to be controlled quickly, for the people involved in the conflict were needed in the field the following morning to work for the well being of the group. The Japanese solved this problem by placing the interest of the community before the interest of the individual, and thus the circumstances and the cultural environment became the melting pot for the development of *tatemaie* and *honne*.

Definition and Understanding of *Tatemaie* and *Honne*

Tatemaie is frequently misunderstood as lying or hypocrisy and foreigners in Japan often tend to relate it to the Western concept of “white lies.” Nevertheless, the word “lie” implies a negative judgment of a social reality that non-Japanese people are seldom in a position to interpret, as they frequently lack the appropriate mechanisms to understand how *tatemaie* functions and manifests in Japanese society and literature.

The two *kanji* ideograms that make up the word *tatemaie* (建前) in Japanese are highly significant. The first one is used in words like “building” (建物 *tatemono*), where it means to build up. The second one, 前 *mae*, means “in front.” The whole word, thus, can be understood as “that which one puts before oneself” and refers to the official stance or the public attitude that the Japanese assume when in a

confrontation or in the possibility of engaging into one. *Tatemae* is, therefore, a cultural concern by which the Japanese feel forced to act according to what they feel the community expects from them. It works like peer pressure, only that the latter, normally the extrinsic influence that a group exerts upon a person, grows weaker as the individual reaches maturity and develops assertiveness. *Tatemae* is, in contrast, an intrinsic force springing from the individual that binds him/her to the social expectations of a community and grows stronger in adulthood. Failure to manifest it constitutes a social transgression for the Japanese since it is determined by a factor: perception of social level, as Hiroshi Minami states in his book *Nihontekijiga* (1983): “The multidimensional quality of the Japanese grew stronger in the hierarchical society of the Edo period of 300 years to acquire its actual state. Since then, mastering *tatemae* and *honne* became a requirement” (Minami, 1983: 203, our translation). When a Japanese person considers that he or she is in a lower level than another individual, *tatemae* becomes a requirement for interacting socially. For the Japanese, many variables affect that perception of one’s own social level, such as age, employment, gender, and familiarity with the speaker. Consequently, the proper use of *tatemae* will result in harmony as the relationships are carried out within the desired social boundaries. Hence, one obvious function of *tatemae* is to keep a peaceful environment for social interaction by avoiding conflicts. However, there are other possible uses:

There seems to be other purposes for which *tatemae* is used. For example, *tatemae* shows more direct purposes in certain contexts such as the speech acts of complimenting or greetings, which themselves may function mostly to maintain harmony. In compliments, the speaker can use *tatemae* either to make the addressee feel good, to make a good impression of him/herself, or both. In a greeting the speaker may tell a person that everything is fine even though she is sick. She may do so to avoid talking about herself or to avoid either worrying the addressee or spending much time with him/her. The reason may differ in different contexts and intentions. In short, it seems that the general purpose of *tatemae* is not necessarily keeping harmony. (Kato, 2000: 13).

Honne, on the other hand, is equivalent to the inner truth that the person holds back. Because of the two *kanji* used to write it (本音), the word can be read as “the true sound.” The most important aspect to be understood about *tatemae* and *honne* is that they are a paired set of concepts and it makes little sense to speak of one without considering the other, as Doi (1986) asserted when he discussed that *tatemae* and *honne* constitute a single reality. He defines *tatemae* as principles, rules and conventions, and *honne* as true intentions or the inner self. Although *honne* is considered a real truth, *tatemae* has a value as important as *honne*. He writes:

It is beyond doubt that *tatemae* of *tatemae-honne* was originally the same word as the word *tatemae* in Japanese architecture, which means ‘raising the ridgepole’... *Tatemae* is also the word used in the tea ceremony for the formal movements of the host in presenting utensils and serving the tea. In both architecture and the tea ceremony *tatemae* is

essential... If the *tatemae* of *tatemae-honne* is indeed the same word, it is impossible to believe it is unimportant. (Kato, 2000: 19).

The sensorial images in the dichotomy reveal the singular consciousness of the Japanese; the visual perception is deceitful; the auditory one is true, but usually unheard since the Japanese do not normally share *honne* with strangers: “A situational use of *honne* for insiders (*utiwa*) and outsiders (*sotomono*), although it may occasionally appear outrageous to Westerners, is a commonly accepted practice in Japan. Foreigners are treated politely with only *tatemae* (outer truth) as “*gaijin*” (outsiders), and are rarely told the *honne* (inner truth), to their frustration” (Kato, 2000: 1, 2). Consequently, a foreigner can expect to hear *honne* only if s/he is regarded as a member of the group. The following figure can summarize the mechanics of this complex social interaction:

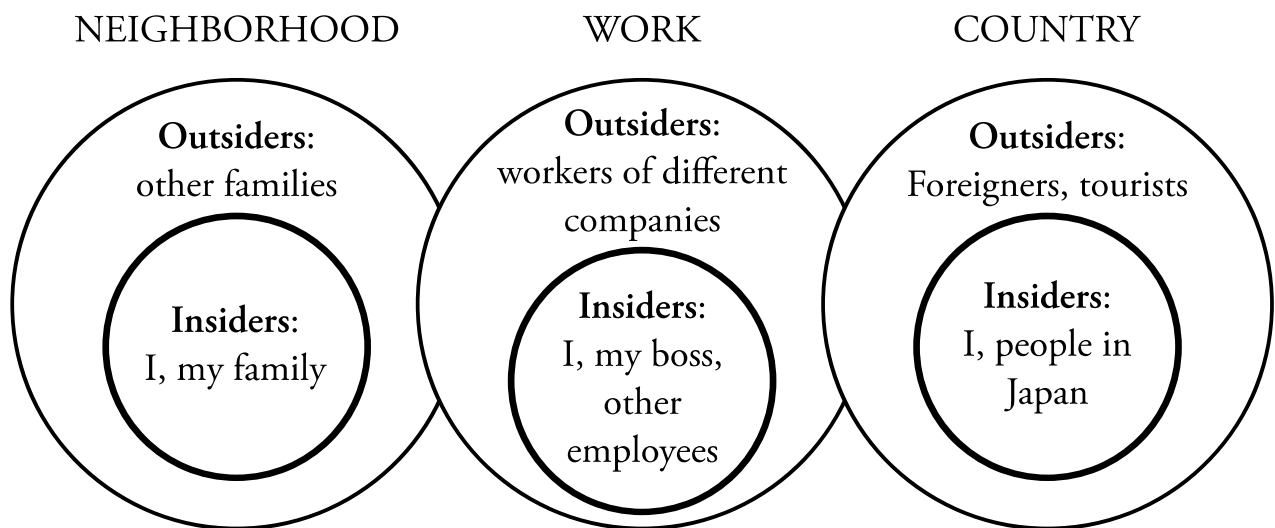


Figure 1: Relationship of insiders and outsiders

As one can see, the treatment as an outsider depends on the level of generality of the situation. The Japanese can perceive a non-Japanese person who has lived in the neighborhood for several years as a *gaijin* when considering family issues, but the same individual can be regarded as an insider if s/he works with the Japanese person in the same company or when considering the situation of the whole country. Conversely, when dealing with private issues, a neighbor can be seen as an outsider even though s/he is actually Japanese.

For the non-Japanese, this situational use of *tatemae-honne* might represent a paradox; a sign of discrimination; in reality, it just manifests social cohesion: “*Honne* is the principle of the individual whereas *tatemae* stands for the principle of the group. The reason why it is said that the Japanese show *tatemae* is because they always act according to the group principle and repress *honno* or the individual principle” (Araki, 1973: 53). This constant psychological self-repression generates anxiety in the Japanese consciousness, as Minami argues:

When someone expresses words of *tatemae* to another person, the consciousness of *honno* flows unavoidably in his or her mind. The stronger the social imposition is, the stronger the consciousness of *honno* becomes and thus the person fears to reveal *honno* carelessly due to the impatience towards oneself that follows *tatemae* (Minami, 1983: 204, our translation).

The build up of anxiety triggered by *tatemae-honne* can be an interesting trait to explore in Japanese literature and might lead to discover new interpretations in the psychology of characters. In addition, a reader can better understand the interactions manifested in a given Japanese text if s/he is aware of the existence of this dichotomy and understands how it works.

Application of *Tateme* and *Honne* in Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen*

A brief analysis of Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen* illustrates how *tatemae* and *honno* helps a reader to unveil hidden sources of meaning in a Japanese text. Yoshimoto follows a well-known Japanese tradition of including literary devices that become notorious in Asian literatures, such as the introduction of the uncanny, magical or mystical elements into an everyday framework, and gendered readings of behavior. Consequently, her best-selling novel becomes an adequate choice for the application of the principles of *tatemae-honne*, for it presents three instances in which the reader can see the dichotomy at work: the first dialog in the novel, Mikage’s first interaction with Yuichi’s mother, and the phone call in the end of the novel.

The story opens with Mikage Sakurai’s explanation of her “mystical” attraction to kitchens. The images are vivid and there is not any problem to understand the descriptions although this unusually strong attraction to a part of the house might surprise a reader. She also provides the context for the plot to develop; her grandmother, the only relative that she had, has just died and she is overwhelmed by depression. Suddenly, the doorbell rings and when she opens the door, Yuichi Tanabe, a young man

whom she met at the funeral and had never contacted with before, stands in front of her. Mikage's first spoken words are directed to him: "Thank you for your help the other day" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 6). Western readers might take this sign of thankfulness as either politeness or plain coldness, especially after reading the short sentences that make up the awkward dialog between them and the invitation that Yuichi makes to her to stay in his house. Since she is completely depressed, one could expect her to turn him down politely, but she agrees to go, which is not natural given the circumstances. After all, it is unlikely that a person who has plunged into a severe depression, as Mikage's condition is, suddenly decides to socialize with a complete stranger. However, when considering the dynamics of *tatemae* and *honne*, one can see how complex this brief interaction between Yuichi and Mikage is. The initial iciness that the latter character manifests despite being depressed is a manifestation of *tatemae*; in this moment Yuichi is an outsider and, hence, she does not want to show her true feelings to him. Thus, she pulls herself together in a split second and, instead of expecting his sympathy, she acts according to what the social expectation is in Japan: Mikage thanks the young man for his help at the funeral. In other words, she knew that her duty was to show politeness and that this expectation had to be placed before her need to wallow in misery. Yuichi, aware of this use of *tatemae*, but knowing that his position is higher than hers at the moment because Mikage has lost her primary social circle (the young woman is now an outsider), asks for personal information: "Did you decide on a place to live yet?" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 6). This personal question reveals that both characters have engaged in a tacit dialog of power dynamics and Mikage has accepted that she is in a lower position. Therefore, she answers with *honne* but, anxious because she has shared personal information with a stranger, resorts immediately to *tatemae*, manifested in the invitation for having a cup of tea. Yuichi, who can read the ambivalent psychology of the morose woman, understands that she actually does not want him to come in. Hence, he declines the invitation and breaks the social norms and *honne*; he tells her that both his mother and him want Mikage to visit them and gives her a paper with the address. In the brief interchange of words that follow her reply, one can see *tatemae* and *honne*:

"Okay..." I said vacantly, taking the slip of paper.

"All right, then, good. Mom and I are both looking forward to your coming." His smile was so bright as he stood in my doorway that I zoomed in for a close-up on his pupils. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I think I heard a spirit call my name.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be there."

Bad as it sounds, it was like I was possessed. His attitude was so totally "cool," though, I felt I could trust him.

(Yoshimoto, 1993: 6).

For a Westerner, the fact that Mikage focuses on Yuichi's eyes might have been a sign of attraction. However, when using *tatema* and *honne* to read it, one sees that it was just the way in which Mikage was trying to understand whether or not Yuichi's actually wanted her to go to his house. After all, Mikage's relationship with him is distant and she suspected him, which challenges the possibility that she felt any attraction towards him: "Before my grandmother's funeral I had barely known him. On the day itself, when Yuichi Tanabe showed up all of a sudden, I actually wondered if he had been her lover" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 7).

In addition, Mikage's reference to the coolness of her visitor is rather strange in the context: she is depressed and her most immediate desire would have been to get rid of him quickly, not to evaluate if he was trustable or not. Such judging of Yuichi's character only makes sense under the light of *tatema* and *honne*. Consequently, this Japanese social construct enables the reader to discover a deeper level of interaction in the short and apparently innocent dialog that opens the novel.

Mikage's first interaction with Yuichi's so-called mother constitutes another clear depiction of the use of *tatema* in the literary work. Yuichi's mother is not in the house the evening Mikage visits them. When a stunningly beautiful woman opens the door, Mikage cannot help staring at her, for she is impressed by this woman's beauty. The woman introduces herself as Eriko. Dumbfounded, Mikage is unable to utter a word for a second before she finally reacts and replies politely. Yuichi takes Eriko back to work and the following conversation takes place when he returns to the house, where Mikage was waiting for him:

"Mikage," he said, "were you intimidated by my mother?"

"Yes," I told him frankly. "I've never seen a woman that beautiful."

"Yes. But..." Smiling, he sat down on the floor right in front of me. "She's had plastic surgery."

"Oh?" I said, feigning nonchalance. "I wondered why she didn't look anything like you."

"And that's not all. Guess what else—she's a man." He could barely contain his amusement.

(Yoshimoto, 1993: 12-13).

The fact that Yuichi noticed that Mikage rudely stared at his mother would have been an embarrassing situation for the young woman, but trying to deny her behavior would have implied that she distrusts her host. Mikage, therefore, is put in a dilemma: either she favors her individuality and covers her rude behavior or she acknowledges her minor social transgression and complies to collective Japanese social conventions, accepting an inferior position. Because she knows that she is an outsider, she decides to comply with the rules of the group, so she answers Yuichi's question straightforwardly with the truth. Her

host is satisfied with her behavior and shares more personal information with her. Upon the initial revelation of Eriko's plastic surgery, Mikage uses *tatemaie* to keep a harmonious environment despite the awkwardness of the situation. The young woman resorts to *tatemaie* in an attempt to be cordial to her host and to gain a little power. Obviously, had she made a direct remark, she could have offended her host. So she hides her true reason to stare at the strikingly beautiful mother and claims that she was looking for a resemblance between her hostess and Yuichi. Yuichi, in turn, taunts her with a new revelation: his mother is actually his father. However, after the disclosure that Eriko is not a woman (an example of *honno*), Mikage feels totally at ease instead of experiencing bewilderment because of this unconventional family, which might be odd given the circumstances. *Tatemaie* and *honno* help one interpret the reason why the young woman is not judgmental in spite of the invitation to stay in such untraditional family environment: she understands that Yuichi's *honno* implies that this family is opening the door for her to enter; they are actually inviting her to become a member of the family and thus she stays with them.

The third instance that best depicts *tatemaie* and *honno* in *Kitchen* is found at the end of the novel, a section that opens with Mikage's visit to a hotel in Shimoda to sample French food. Interestingly, Mikage ends up alone because all of the people visiting the place with her went to bed early, as she claims: "Why was it that the entire group was made up of people who went to bed so early? For me, a night owl, this would not do" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 103). Therefore, she takes a stroll on the beach near the hotel. For a non-Asian reader, this reveals little about the inner state of the young woman; most readers would suppose that Mikage is simply bored and, consequently, decided to go out to kill some time. However, if one is aware of *tatemaie/honno*, one discovers that there is more under the surface of her narration. Mikage is treating the reader as an outsider, so her sentences are *tatemaie*, polite constructions to hide her inner truth. What necessity does she have to take a walk on the beach on a freezing night? If one tries to read for her *honno*, one sees that there are multiple references to pain underlying her seemingly innocent description of that particular stroll: "Even wrapped in my coat and wearing two pairs of stockings, I was so cold that I wanted to scream. On my way out I had bought a hot can of coffee from the vending machine, and now I was carrying it in my pocket. It was *very* hot" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 103). This walk, therefore, becomes an episode of self-inflicting pain for her because her mind is tortured by anxiety and she does not want to reveal such condition. The description that she gives of the climatic conditions also stresses the fact that Mikage's original complaint about how early her friends went to sleep is but a façade: "As the cold wind rages around me, the night seemed to echo in my head [...] I could see the shadowy forms of gigantic, rugged crags against which the waves were crashing. In the biting air I told myself, there will be so much pleasure, so much suffering. With or without Yuichi" (Yoshimoto, 1993: 103-104). Mikage's *honno*

surfaces at last: her distraught mind is a direct consequence of her anxiety concerning having a relationship with Yuichi. Hence, her description of the pleasurable events (company, the French food) is minimal while her narration of the stroll, an apparently irrelevant event, is given a more detailed description.

After this rather painful walk on the beach, Mikage returns to her hotel room and, once again, her narration is *tatemae*; she is feigning nonchalance, so the young woman describes the room and the environment as cozy and warm despite she is being consumed by anxiety: “I took a hot shower while I waited for the tea water to boil. As I was sitting up in bed in my warm, fresh pajamas, the phone rang” . (Yoshimoto, 1993: 104). If the reader follows her *tatemae*, one is able to understand that she is not actually waiting for the water to boil; she is expecting something to happen. Her wish becomes a reality; Mikage receives a phone call. It is from the person at the front desk, who informs her that someone is trying to reach her and transfers the call. It is Yuichi, who greets her and says that tracking her was not easy. Mikage's *honne* manifests when she hears his voice: “Where are you calling from?” I asked, laughing. My heart was slowly beginning to relax”. (Yoshimoto, 1993: 104). The conversation seemed casual and trivial, yet it reveals that Yuichi has finally made his mind and wants to start a serious relationship with Mikage. The young woman is excited to hear Yuichi's voice, yet she uses *tatemae* to hide her feelings from him not to put him under pressure. Consequently, she starts talking about the delicious food that she has eaten during the trip. Then she casually mentions that she sent by express mail a package containing selected food items to her apartment and tells him that he can go pick it up as he has the key. Using the duality *tatemae* and *honne*, the reader discovers that she is actually telling him how much she has missed him. Yuichi's reply reveals his true feelings. He asks a question that sounds like an extremely rude imposition: “Why didn't you send sashimi and prawns? (Yoshimoto, 1993: 105). He picked up the subtle clue that Mikage left and his question tells her “I have missed you a lot, too.” Consequently, Mikage, aware of this fact, is delighted instead of getting offended by his exigent reply:

“Because there's no way to send them!” I laughed.

Yuichi sounded happy. “Too bad—I'm picking you up at the station tomorrow, so you could have carried them with you. What time are you getting in?”

The room was warm, filling with the steam from the boiling water. I launched into what time I'd be in and what platform I'd be on. (Yoshimoto, 1993: 105).

Japanese readers consider this final conversation a pure expression of romantic love. For readers who are not familiar with *tatemae* and *honne*, the end of the novel can be perplexing or even flavorless. A Japanese, because of his/her knowledge of *tatemae* and *honne*, immediately understands that Yuichi is not talking about doing Mikage a favor, but proposing to her. Mikage picked up this *tatemae-honne* clue and

accepts his proposal.

The ambiguity of feelings that both characters show to each other through the novel are a combination of *tatemae* and *honne*; the reader might think that they are afraid of commitment if s/he ignores the mechanics of Japanese outer and inner truth. Mikage's apparently undefined personality (bold at times, bashful in some other instances) can be explained by this social mechanism that the Japanese developed to maintain harmony and social cohesion. Similarly, Yuichi's indecision is also an expression of the situational use of *tatemae* and *honne*. When a reader ignores the existence of the two concepts, s/he interprets the text in a "Western" fashion, which implies that s/he fails to understand the intricacies of the Japanese interaction that the novel manifests. The duality *tatemae* and *honne* is an enriching interpretive resource that Western readers should be aware of when dealing with Japanese literary texts. Perhaps, if literary criticism could stop applying Euro-constructs as universal interpretive tools, critics would discover the importance of other particular characteristics of Japanese psychology and society that, when applied to the analysis of Japanese literature, would reveal important readings previously overlooked. In this light, *tatemae* and *honne* challenge the assumption of the universality of Western literary approaches and might be the foundation of an approach that enables the reader to produce more accurate social and psychological interpretations of Japanese literature.

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