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Manga tends to Modernity: Negotiating Transformation through the Lens of Yoshihiro Tatsumi's *A Drifting Life*

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Abstract:

Manga, a popular visual narrative art form that had originated in Japan has now acquired a global fandom. During the inter-war and post occupational years, manga had undergone serious transmogrification; branching out into several genres. The objective of this particular paper is to explore one particular juncture in the saga of the evolution of manga, which is the 'gekiga'. The mangaka (manga artist) Yoshihiro Tatsumi popularized this term as Tatsumi and his colleagues desired to create manga stories with serious, dark and compelling intent, meant for an adult readership. Tatsumi, who was born in 1935, had seen Japan transform drastically over the two decades post World War II. How then, does the artist negotiate with his creation as they both transform during a tumultuous adolescence, through to adulthood? Furthermore, how does manga, a form in motion, mutate itself vis-à-vis the riotous socio-political backdrop of Japan from the 1940s to 60s?

Keywords: Manga, Narrative, Japan, Transformation, Modern

Manga, a graphic medium primarily associated with Japan, has managed to acquire a global fan base over the last few decades. *Manga* in Japanese means comic/funny/whimsical (*man*) pictures (*ga*). The root of modern manga can be traced back to the previous century. During the inter-war and post occupational years, manga had undergone considerable transformation; branching out into twenty something sub-genres. During the process, the form, content and even the moniker of medium had mutated. In the turn of the last century, there were erotic woodcuts or *shunga*(春 *shu*, the kanji can be read as *haru*, which indicates, spring, maturity, blossoming et al), *toba-e*, popular gags of traditional four panel format named after the priest-artist Toba, *gagekior* picture theatre and so on. Noted among these are the 12th century *emakimono Chōjū-giga picture scrolls* of anthropomorphized "frolicking" animals. They are an acerbic commentary upon the priests who have deviated from the path of asceticism. Some of them are credited to Toba. *Gekiga*, the governing force behind Yoshihiro Tatsumi's artistic career was not conceived in a vacuum. It was a short-lived movement, yet a vital step for the trajectory of manga.

A common misconception regarding manga has been persistent. An uninitiated reader often confuses it with cartoons, primarily meant for children. Social media parades 'memes' exploiting this confusion wherein a 'true' manga fan is chagrined by such a misunderstanding and reacts adversely towards the novice. Such a misreading is perhaps fathomable, as manga uses the comic

form, or 'mode', as Scott McCloud would suggest. Following that argument, one can claim that under the umbrella of the comic mode of art, 'manga' happens to be a genre with subcategories. Manga itself is not a monolith, as it is peppered by signature styles of different mangaka(s). To release manga from constraints of juvenile expectation was the fundamental impetus guiding Tatsumi's commitment to *gekiga*. *Gekiga*, unlike manga, implies dramatic pictures.

Tatsumi's magnum opus graphic autobiography, *A Drifting Life* is a prestigious, yet obscure text. *A Drifting Life*, or *Gekiga Hyōryū* was published in 2008, first in Japanese, and then in English by Drawn and Quarterly. It is a text of 800 plus pages; divided into 48 chapters. It has been awarded the Osamu Tezuka Cultural Prize in 2009 and is the winner of two Eisner Awards in 2010. From my continued interaction with the manga fandom in India and beyond, I have gathered that this is not a potboiler title. It is a memoir that illustrates the artist's life and career, paralleled with Japan's adjustment with the post-war era. Through a study of this graphic Künstlerroman, in a manner of speaking; I would attempt to chart the interfaces between the microcosm of the Tatsumi's life and work and two possibly interrelated macrocosms;

- (i) The metamorphosis of the manga form, filtered through the substantial intervention of 'gekiga'.
- (ii) Manga, or specifically, Tatsumi's *gekiga* as a metonymy of Japan's approach to modernity/industrial/corporate times; and how that commands the rapport between the master and his craft.

The study of the text is substantiated by the cinematic adaptation from 2011 named *Tatsumi*, directed by Erik Khoo. It is a reworking of *A Drifting Life* primarily, along with five independent *gekiga* pieces by Tatsumi, two of which are from *Abandon the Old in Tokyo*, his album of short tales from the 1970s. They are titled *Occupied* and *Beloved Monkey* respectively. In all these stories, the artist deftly delineates a society recovering from the horrors of a nuclear holocaust.

A Drifting Life, or *Gekiga Hyōryū* is a chronicle of almost fifteen years, from the 1945 to the 1960s protest movements against the US-Japan Security Treaty. Both the kanjis of *hyō* and *ryū* suggests drifting or floating. The narrative begins a few days after the nuclear massacre as Japan surrenders to the US forces. The epilogue takes a leap in time to 1989, wherein the emotionally devastated narrator attends his idol mangaka Osamu Tezuka's funeral. Yoshihiro Tatsumi, or Hiroshi Katsumi's account in the narrative, begins in his early adolescence. His family in Osaka belongs to the lower income group and is familiar with struggle. For young Hiroshi, manga is simultaneously a shot at future prosperity; as well as an oasis amid quotidian drudgery. The cinematic counterpart ties up the loose ends between the 1960s, where Tatsumi's reminiscent montage of memories ends, and the epilogue.

As mentioned earlier, manga is not a monolith. But for me to classify it, I refer to Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' from his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein states,

[...] we see a complicated net-work of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: similarities in the large and in the small. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth overlap and criss-cross in the same way. (Wittgenstein 36)

Incidentally, Toni Johnson Woods in the introduction to *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives* remarks;

Manga is a visual narrative with a recognizable "sensibility." The term *sensibility* is intentionally vague in order to cover a multitude of options and embraces the stereotypical big-eyed, pointy chinned characters that many people consider the epitome of manga, the Disneyesque style of Osamu Tezuka, and the realistic style of corporate manga. Not all manga looks the same and not all manga has the same philosophical issues or the same readership. I fit calls itself manga, then it is manga. (Johnson-Woods1-2)

Manga is a motley of such 'sensibilities' and *gekiga* is a significant one of them. Scholars who have studied genealogy of manga, have commented upon the ethnic as well as the foreign influences that shaped it, scholars such as Kinko Ito, Natsume Fusanosuke, Frederick Schodt, Robert Petersen and so on. Ever since Commodore Perry permeated the walls of the island nation through the Kanagawa treaty, Japan has been exposed to comic art practices from the West. It can be presumed that the influence of artists like Charles Wirgman and George Bigot are as important as the *emakimono* scrolls, *Ukiyo-e* woodblocks or *kamishibai* showcase storytelling custom. In page 56 of his text, Tatsumi depicts the custom of *kamishibai*, or story telling shows. They features myths and folklores wherein the panels were often hand drawn by the story tellers themselves. With the advent of television, the tradition lost its popularity. Some *kamishibai* practitioners changed their vocation to manga art. During the inter-war and US occupation years, Japan's interaction with foreign cultures progressed and manga was not unaffected. Hiroshi's *gekiga* is a sensibility that is in accordance with this transformation. And nothing possibly captures its essence better than *A Drifting Life*.

As opposed to manga, *gekiga* is intended for an adult readership. It illustrates themes of serious intent, narratives with psychological nuance and compelling realistic artwork. Young Hiroshi initially concentrates upon *yon-koma* or conventional four panel humorous manga. He and his elder brother Okimasa frequently participate in postcard manga competitions organized by print media houses. Hiroshi's dedication wins him the attention of the *Mainichi Shimbun* (it literally means daily newspaper). Courtesy the exposure, he manages to come across other young manga artists who end up forming a fraternity. They also meet Osamu Tezuka, who was later

hailed as the 'God of Modern Manga', then a young medical student and a rising star. Tezuka is one of the first in his generation who engaged in long narrative manga as opposed to short pieces circulated by rental libraries. (*Kashihonya*, or manga rental libraries flourished due to rationing in paper in the Post War era. Now, they have taken the shape of manga cafes. In India, two noted ones are *Leaping Windows* in Mumbai and *Mangaful* in South Delhi.) Highly reverent of Disney, he is also celebrated for his employment of cinematic techniques. Personal encounters with the maestro encourage Hiroshi to try his hand at longer stories. As the artist gradually enters professional manga publishing arena, he finds the short story manga form limited in capacity. Frustrated, an idea of an alternative manga, or 'manga that is not manga' is born. *Gekiga* is a legacy that had influenced Tezuka's later works and paved the way for *Garo*, the avant-garde manga magazine from the 1960s. Ironically, as Erik Khoo tells us, Tezuka was apparently dismissive of *gekiga* during its initiation, a sentiment for which he was later repentant.

Misinterpretation of manga is not new and it has led to sporadic bursts of censorship. But Frederick Schodt reflects that censorship in contemporary Japan, especially when it comes to manga is not too austere. Genre specific texts contain gore, violence, erotica, graphic and thematic content unsuitable for children. But in Hiroshi's youth, when the understanding of manga is yet to be relatively nuanced, his and his friends' works are often deemed evil and corrupting. Hiroshi is exasperated by this inherent presumptuous trivialization and wishes to segregate their work from the moniker of "manga". Hiroshi and Okimasa debate thoroughly on the pros and cons of an experimental form. Finally, after much deliberation, the two brothers agree on the name *gekiga* and release invitations and a manifesto for fellow artists to join *studio gekiga*. The journey for Hiroshi's vision towards consummation is not smooth. But even when he has aged considerably in the epilogue and is unnerved by Tezuka's demise, he still cannot give up on his dream of flourishing *gekiga*. The film enunciates it handsomely, by expanding it to show manga fans indulging in *A Drifting Life* when the artist visits a book store. It winds up with real life cuts that show Yoshihiro Tatsumi hard at work in his studio.

Interestingly, the 'problem of shelving' mentioned by Okimasa conversation is relevant to manga marketing even today. With insistent misreading, manga often populates the children's book sections of stores and libraries. Although now, certain chains harbor a 'graphic novel' section wherein limited manga titles are available. Thus, fuelled by Okimasa's insight, Hiroshi finds another incentive to launch the *gekiga* banner for adults who are conscious that blood will flow within the text when a character is fatally wounded. (Tatsumi 576)

Hiroshi is mesmerized by American and European cinema upon their debut in Japan. He watches everything; whether it's an animation, romantic flick, Wild West cowboy action, ethnic samurai drama or fairy tale. Tatsumi populates his graphic progression of memories with countless panels and covers dedicated to his love for films. He studies American comics to energize action sequences in his works like *Arsene Gent*. Use of English words in manga titles is not unusual, presumably an outcome of communication between Japan and other nations where

English is the lingua franca. Meanwhile, Hiroshi, motivated by the first 3D film released in Japan, creates a 3D manga, which is considered too unusual by his publisher.

The current readership of manga is familiar with the range of innovative tendencies, including debunking of the ‘gutter space’, or accentuation of details; such as a single eye, or a cherry blossom petal. Often words are free flowing, unrestricted by speech bubbles. One also encounters silent panels sprawling over two pages. Tatsumi’s work is distinctive in terms of form and content. His characters of Japanese ethnicity tend to have a semblance of epicanthic eyes, unlike the exaggerated rounded eyes of later manga. The conformist four panel format is broken, but the artist still abides by the gutter space. Yet within the prescribed box; he qualifies to represent every intimate and grotesque detail of human nature. From scatology to erotic details; nothing goes amiss. Tatsumi’s seemingly deliberate lack of finesse in character drawing, additional attention to background details, overt use of black in globules perhaps render his art a sense of tangibility. The paradox rests in the fact that in *A Drifting Life*, which was published in 2008, Tatsumi could have revised his style to suit contemporary tastes. But he remains consistent with his own. It is perhaps appropriate, as he regales stories from an era bygone, for himself, his art and his country.

Post-War Manga display a nebulous affinity towards incorporation of realism, which is later honed by Tatsumi and Tezuka. But, during wartime, manga artists like Ryuichi Yokoyama were drafted to be sent to the front. They were asked to create propagandist manga in order to encourage young boys to join the army. After the nuclear holocaust, anti-war manga became widely acceptable in later years, such as Keiji Nakazawa’s *Hadashi no Gen*. As propagandist manga would suggest; artistic pursuits are not always autonomous. Creativity might suffer abrasion from circumstances beyond the artist’s control; whether personal or professional (social-political). Such dilemmas are inevitable for Hiroshi, given how Japan was trying to regain its footing. His pledge to his craft is often oscillated by the various other commitments that populate his life. His first compatriot and rival when it comes to manga, Okimasa suffers from a serious ailment of the lungs, barring him from living a rounded life. In this unfortunate quandary, Hiroshi becomes his outlet for resentment as well as a means of vicarious youthfulness. Okimasa recovers after the launch of streptomycin in Japan. Consequently, he finds a career and renewed enthusiasm to support his brother’s artistic pursuits.

Hiroshi shares a compulsive qualitative-quantitative relation with *gekiga*. His art is the only source for respite in his growing years. Yet, he is not always free to choose what he can draw as he is subjected to politics of publication and marketing of manga. Even prior to that, he cannot concentrate on longer narratives as advised by Tezuka as short pieces sell better and his family needs every penny. By the time he is sitting for Kyoto art college entrance which he leaves incomplete, certain existential doubts regarding his purpose as a mangaka has festered.

After leaving Osaka and moving to Tokyo, Hiroshi continues to be uncertain about his art. He is caught between egotistical scuffles of publishers *Hinomaru* and *Kenbunsha*, while haggling for deserved remuneration. His insecurities regarding himself make his imaginative vitality dwindle. The crisis is partially muted when *gekiga* finally sees the light of the day and *Black Blizzard* is exceptionally well received. Rationing on print paper ceases and Japan experiences economic growth; post the Korean War. But it also folds up the rental libraries, which took off predominantly due to the lacuna and by extension, popularity of short manga tales diminishes. Even then, *gekiga* does not proceed unchallenged, primarily due to logistics. When the studio fumbles, Hiroshi temporarily loses motivation and indulges in distraction. Additionally, he is burdened with the responsibility of a managing editor. *Gekiga* reaches its peak with Takao Saito's *Baron Air* and Masahiko Matsumoto's *Kage*. Then it gradually loses inertia, the primary cause being *Hinomaru*'s bankruptcy. It was probably time to take it further, which *Garo* precisely ends up doing. But Hiroshi, ever the sensitive soul, perceives it differently. Caught up in a fervent demonstration against the US-Japan Security Treaty in Tokyo; he concludes that *gekiga* has deteriorated due to that lack of anger in the collective consciousness. For him, personal is perceivably political.

Yet, his sentiment might have a reasonable explanation. Japan, while recovering steadily from a state of catatonic crisis, manifold nuances of which are arrested by the artist; such as introduction of commercial airlines and recruitment of female cabin crew, performance in the Olympics, the launch of passports, the construction of the Tokyo tower, introduction of household television, royal marriage celebration of Akihito and Michiko; Japan was well on its way to achieve stability and prosperity. Presumably, the incentives for public fury were decreasing, until the treaty. Whether he is correct or not is inconsequential compared to the fact that his creativity is persistently shadowed by these proceedings.

Hiroshi is a figure who might be referred to as a member of the first generation *otaku*. Schodt points out; later confirmed by scholars John E. Ingulsrud and Kate Allen; about how manga evolved as the first generation of *otakus* grew up but could not abandon the medium. Hence manga adapted to suit adult palates. Many *Otakus* of today connect and share their artistic yields and *dōjinshi*, courtesy the cyber nexus. But even without internet, Hiroshi and his peers manage to garner a kinship. Tatsumi carries the torch and later joins *Garo*, which encouraged anti-authoritarian narratives. One might notice a certain predisposition towards cyclicity in the lineage of manga. The early *Otakus* who desired the advancement of the form were often inspired by foreign mediums. But today, artists from countries other than Japan; in South-East Asia, Europe, Britain and America are creating graphic texts which they choose to call 'OEL (Original English Language) manga', 'manga inspired comics', 'manfra' or 'la nouvelle manga', 'Amerimanga', 'Euromanga' et al. So much so that the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, in their 'COOL JAPAN' policy of 2012, declared the dissemination of manga and associated merchandise as an agency to 'soft power'. Iwabuchi Koichi argues that contemporary manga is *mukokuseki*, literally stateless, implying cultural odorlessness. In the same vein, Mio

Bryce refers to manga as 'glocal'. While that asks for further deliberation, in conclusion, one can suggest Tatsumi's drifting life in search of *gekiga* and the contemporaneous 'glocal' manga could be counterparts of the same Mobius strip, to engage in exploring grounds hitherto uncharted.

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