

**PERSPECTIVAL OPPOSITIONS, AMBIVALENCE
AND THE CONVERTED “COLONIZER”
IN JAMES CLAVELL’S *SHŌGUN***

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Abstract:

This paper is based on an analysis of the visions on life, the existence and role of the individual in the world and identity, as they appear projected by characters in the novel – the main character, Blackthorne, the Japanese woman he falls in love with, Mariko, and the Japanese community as an identity group. We demonstrate that the protagonist suffers a radical transformation in his outlook on all the above, the result being his “becoming”, a new man. We are interested in pinpointing the double nature of the characters and, to this end, we will reveal the aspects in which ambivalence is detected.

1. Initial Assumptions

John Blackthorne is the captain of the crew aboard the *Erasmus*, leaving England to go through Magellan’s Straits, and is bound to accost on Japanese territory as a result of a hurricane. The members of the crew are taken prisoners, locked in a few square meters in the dark, left for days hungry and teeming with their own secretions, humiliated and intentionally traumatized in the mentally eroding situation they are in. They are asked to choose one to sacrifice so that the rest could live and, although one is severely ill with yellow fever and scurvy and is unlikely to make it through the next days anyway, the only solution they can think of is draw sticks and let chance decide. Two of them are killed in a cruel manner by the Japanese, and Blackthorne is humiliated on purpose (a samurai urinates on his back) and blackmailed to withstand this shame with no retaliation in exchange for the life of his crew. He also has to accept living with a samurai in his home, adopting the Japanese dress and habits – so renouncing his identity – and does so to protect the others.

The main opposition that is being created in the first pages by the context above is that between the Europeans as a group as the “good” and the Japanese as the “bad”. The former are civilized, respectful of human life and humane, refusing to kill the physically weakest among them just based on the fact that he will not survive anyway. They support each other in a brotherly, Christian manner. By opposition, the Japanese are cruel, careless of individual life, enjoying torture, as they boil a

European – Pieterzoon – and let him scream for a day in agony in the cauldron before he finally dies, and as they let one of the Japanese who has fallen in the pit where they keep the prisoners take his own life. After he tries to kill himself by drowning in the bucket used as latrine by the others and refuses to drink any water, making Blackthorne ask how long he could hold out, Jan Roper's answer sums up their opinions of the Japanese: "Forever. [...] They're animals. They're not human." (Clavell, 2009, p. 303). The Japanese confiscate and unload all the cannons, treasures and documents that they find on Erasmus as if these were war prey or spoils, appearing as not only warriors but also thieves. Since they take into account, interpret and avenge every little gesture of resistance from the others, they appear as spiteful, malicious and eager to punish and harm other human beings out of sheer pleasure. This perspective is obviously the Europeans' and ours as readers at the beginning.

However, there is another perspective subtly emerging from the dialogues taking place between the Japanese. They wonder at the heartiness and fierceness with which the European Christians hold on to their lives while to them these seem insignificant. Also, to their awe, life matters more to the white people than honour, a reason for which they despise Blackthorne and his crew. Why they think like that is revealed in a different light than cruelty and lack of spirituality later in the novel, when the reader changes his perspective completely, along with Blackthorne, to the opposite pole. The outlook we initially share – the Europeans' – disgusted by Pieterzoon's shrieks of pain and inhumanity of the Japanese – is progressively blurred as we are made to understand the Japanese ways. We slowly and progressively feel unclear about the firm convictions we have started with. It is the process Blackthorne undergoes himself.

The Japanese also appear as overtly sexual and unembarrassed to talk about their sexuality – which, from Blackthorne's initial point of view, is not open-mindedness but rather shamelessness, opposing his Christian, orthodox background and mentality. He may appear as possessing common sense, whereas the Japanese lack it – at least this is the understanding that we get on the reader's first impression (assuming the implied, generic reader is part of a Eurocentric, western, white community).

2. Ambivalences, Crossings and Blurrings of the Lines

If we think about setting and context in the novel, we cannot help but notice that there are a few activities that come to the fore obsessively. The first would be trade – taking place between the Europeans and the Americas, within the Oriental world between the Japanese and the Chinese etc. Close to it comes translation –

Blackthorne needs translators to be able to talk with the Japanese. Then, thirdly, there is negotiation, which is emphasized as a *sine qua non* part of any encounter, not only between the main character and his hosts, but also within the Japanese world at all levels – between lords and vassals, in war, within couples, in the realm of pleasures, to set the price for a courtesan, in haikus, or even in simple, apparently inconsequential conversations. The common feature of all these activities is that they involve hermeneutics, decoding and negotiation, and it is my contention that hermeneutics, by reuniting by its very definition two opposites, is in fact a key to the reading of meaning in the novel. It is also the illustration of the notions of ambiguity or ambivalence, whose manifestations we analyze in what follows.

Blackthorne is a European, but European identity is not unitary, but torn by conflicts as well. He is an Englishman, meaning that the Spanish and the Portuguese are his enemies or at least opposites, due to both their common Catholic religion (as opposed to English Protestantism) and their enmity with the English at sea as traders and seekers of supremacy. The Elizabethan age of triumph over the Catholic Spanish Armada (1588) associates with an ardent Protestantism, and the victory of the British traders has been interpreted as God's grace towards and love for Protestants. Moreover, Blackthorne is the only Englishman on a Dutch ship, which again particularizes him further even when among friends or people belonging to the same side. Nevertheless, he speaks Portuguese fluently, just as Mariko, and in this respect such knowledge may be understood as an infiltration in the enemy's mind, as obeying the imperative of knowing one's enemy and perhaps as a subversive method to defeat it with its own weapons. As a Protestant Englishman, he does not trust Catholics, but has to make do with needing them. On the one hand, Jesuits translate for him in his encounters with the Japanese, which is ironical enough, as he gets to depend on the people he considers his opponents. His words are literally passed through this enemy's filter and it is only through this filter that they can be heard by the Other, which has to make Blackthorne bear a considerable amount of frustration. On the other hand, by being the language that Blackthorne and Mariko have in common, Portuguese functions as a catalyst that brings them closer together, in their ultimately romantic relationship, and therefore a friendly, fostering "environment" while still remaining a defining characteristic of the enemy, part of its identity and hence something to be rejected/abhorred. Catholicism paradoxically has a similar function, as, since Mariko has learnt about it and even declares herself a Catholic, it helps her understand some of his European religious feelings and mentality better.

Subversiveness is, by its very nature, linked with ambivalence, presupposing not only confrontation in the open, but also an indirect, undisclosed one, a hidden

face and intentions. A second feature that points to Blackthorne's ambivalence is his adopted Japanese name and status. He is not only John Blackthorne, the English captain and the European, but also Anjin-san (the Japanese counterpart of Pilot-san), a samurai and a *batamoto*, which is the highest vassal rank to the sovereign Japanese Toranaga. The secret agenda in his mind, with which he takes up this new identity, is revenge for all the humiliations he suffers, including being sold from one Japanese lord to another and the demise and victimization of some members of his crew. Revenge refers to the attack of, victory over and finally exodus of the Japanese, which he intends to carry out after they allow him to return to England and come back with reinforcements to, so he says, plunder another ship for their mutual benefit – a pretext and a sham. The very existence of this agenda adds to his double nature. Even though his Japanese identity is at first assumed only as a cover, performed and masqueraded with no conviction, it gradually becomes Blackthorne, who will come to identify with it more than with his old one.

His agenda functions as a subversion of his Japanese identity first and foremost, as his ploy is to undermine the Nippon people. He begins from a position in which he is untrue to these Others, scheming to get revenge against them for the humiliation of his crew. He sees them as barbaric, and himself as civilized, starting from zero empathy and understanding of their ways. His evolution is towards not only empathy with their logic in things, but also identification with Japanese identity, which becomes his. In this way, he comes to subvert English-European identity as well, just as completely as he did the Japanese one at the beginning, to which he was derisive and apparently immune. His coming full circle makes the attribution of the roles of "barbarian" and "civilized" difficult. These characterizations are ambiguous when used in reference to the two identity groups in the novel: "the gradual acceptance of Japanese culture by the hero Blackthorne bears the clear implication that the West has something to learn from Japan [...] the initial image of the Japanese as 'barbarians' was a foil for the hero's eventual understanding that Japan is not only civilized, but maybe even more civilized than the West" (Smith, 1980, p. 11). He ends up envisaging his previous self as in a mirror in the humorous description offered by David Plath "BEM: a backward European male" (Plath, 1980, p. 24) or a member of the class of "bug-eyed monsters that populate science fiction" (23).

As far as his status in the English society is concerned, Blackthorne's position proves contradictory in some respects as well. As a pilot, despite his advanced skills in his occupation, he would not have had access to the gentry; he is neither a gentleman, nor a peasant (though not much above one in status); his grim dirty household appears as a modest one; his foul language sends to the same idea.

Paradoxically for his low status, he is fluent in several languages, which, given his being a pilot at sea is not as unusual as his knowledge of Latin, though – a point made by Sandra Piercey as well (Piercey, 1980, p. 37). He also claims to be the descendant of a knight, which is incongruent with the rest of his “biography”. Consequently, his real English status and identity remain ambiguous.

As the book *Learning from Shōgun* has stated, *Shōgun* definitely has a didactic purpose of increasing intercultural awareness. Its historical value is uncontestable as one can get a real image of the Japanese culture from it, learning about cultural realities such as the samurai caste, their code of honor, the tea ceremony, *geisha* etc. Nevertheless, the Japan depicted in the novel is not one hundred percent accurate historical truth. For instance, Blackthorne could not have become a real samurai as he was never a warrior, not to mention a *batamoto*; his access to and love affair with a dame of the high society such as Mariko would have been at best highly unlikely – and the list of discrepancies may continue. Along this line of argumentation, the Japan we are reading about is both a land with documentary value and a fictional construct, bearing compensatory value as a mythical place where core problems of the modern man, such as the fear of death and the need for a liberated sexuality, are addressed, given a solution somehow – hence, the realm’s appeal. That is the argument given by David Plath, who sees the Japan described in *Shōgun* as rather the land of imagination, calling it “Jawpen”, a “place of which so many Westerners have *jawed* and *penned*. [...] made up of traditional Japanese parts, but [...] invented and assembled here in the West for domestic consumption.” (Plath, 1980, p. 20) Its status is that of a space formed as partly genuine, partly an Eurocentric self-serving utopist construct.

Although the Spanish and the Portuguese share the same religion (Catholic), a similar language and leaders, the former has conquered the latter, so the relationship is rather one of subservience. Also, they fight over whose control Japan really is under and over the best ways to assimilate Japan. Whether Japan should be dominated religiously, by either the Counter-Reformation Jesuits’ or the Franciscans’ world views (which are dissimilar), or be under the military and commercial control of the Portuguese is unsettled. The Jesuits often diverge in their outlooks and teachings as well. In a conversation with Blackthorne, the Jesuit priest Sebastio reveals his point of view on the identity of the Portuguese and the Spanish: “‘But Portugal and Spain are the same country now,’ Blackthorne said, taunting. ‘You’ve the same king.’ ‘We’re a separate country. We’re a different people. We have been forever. We fly our own flag. Our overseas possessions are separate, yes, separate. King Philip agreed when he stole my country.’ [...] ‘He took my country by force of arms twenty years ago! His soldiers and that devil-spawned Spaniard tyrant, the Duke

of Alva, they crushed our real king. *Que va!* Now Philip's son rules but he's not our real king either. Soon we'll have our own king back again." (Clavell, 2009, pp. 75-6). Blackthorne's answer comes promptly, betraying his contempt for the lack of courage and spine of the Portuguese: "Alva was a plague in the Netherlands, but he never conquered them. They're still free. Always will be. But in Portugal he smashed one small army and the whole country gave in. No courage. You could throw the Spaniard out if you wanted to, but you'll never do it. No honor. No *cojones*. Except to burn innocents in the name of God." (76).

Within the Oriental world, there was no uniformity either. The Japanese and Chinese ideologies clashed. China had been prohibited from entering commercial relations with Japan in the 16th century, as the latter was considered a threat to morality by being a land of opportunists and thieves, "the home of pirates and marauders" (Toby, 1980, p. 44). Under the Ming dynasty, China was interested in becoming an ideological power rather than an economic one, in being viewed as the "Central Kingdom," where others would come as "tributaries" that acknowledge the moral superiority and power of the kingdom (44). Even though other countries around, such as Vietnam or Korea had accepted this supremacy of China, Japan could not have adopted the same position, as the Japanese considered their country as descending from gods – the "Land of the Gods" (Clavell, 2009, p. 1242) (Toby, 1980, p. 44). Until 1547 the Japanese penetrated Chinese lands for commercial purpose using "tallies" (licenses), and in the second part of the 16th century by pirating with "*nako*"s or corsairs sometimes hired by Chinese factionists prone to overturn their own emperor's rule in China (44-5). To point further to the judgmental attitudes existing not only between the European and the Oriental world, but also among the Oriental nations themselves, we refer to a conversation taking place between Mariko and Rodrigues: "Do all Portuguese call us monkeys? And Jappos? Behind our backs?" Rodrigues pulled at the earring he wore. 'Don't you call us barbarians? Even to our face? We're civilized, at least we think so, senhora. In India, the land of Buddha, they call Japanese 'Eastern Devils' and won't allow any to land if they're armed. You call Indians 'Blacks' and nonhuman. What do the Chinese call Japanese? What do you call the Chinese? What do you call the Koreans? Garlic Eaters, neh?'" (Clavell, 2009, pp. 1241-2).

The Japanese are masters of deceit. Almost every single individual plots against somebody, but at the same time artfully hides his feelings. Hence, we cannot contradict Henry Smith's observation that, according to the Western stereotype, they are "inscrutable" and, generally, that one of their chief characteristics is "*duplicity*" (Smith, 1980, p. 52). The emphasis laid on honor comes as a logical "corollary" (53) against the background of a society fragmented by conflict for power. Then again,

protecting one's *daimyo* comes as a necessity – if the vassal lost his master, he was instantly deprived of his possessions – so, if we look at it in this light, where honoring one's lord finished and a self-preservation instinct began was unclear (90).

Nevertheless, to do them justice, Smith goes on to say that, to their merit, the society is governed by “the prevalence of law and order” (53). Pointing to the paradoxes of samurai behavior, Smith notices: “We see samurai who can be vicious sadists and yet refined masters of poetry and the tea ceremony. And we see samurai who habitually act on sudden, unthinking impulse and yet who seem to be constantly calculating every future move.” (86) Smith's explanation for these is firstly that we, as Europeans/Westerners, have in our mind a lifeless ideal pattern of the samurai, which does not fit Clavell's characters since these are living, breathing human beings with their own struggles and flaws – Clavell's merit being precisely his ability to “*humanize*” them (87). A second reason for the samurais' ambivalences would be that the 1600 samurai held a pivotal worldview, trapped with one foot in a past of civil wars and treachery and with the other already on the brink of a new era of stability, peace and order (87).

Toranaga is the typical Japanese at his core, part of the aristocracy and thus entitled to rule more than his opponent, Taikō, seen as a peasant, a man of no respectable descent and therefore less suitable for a leader. Although a proud Japanese, viewed as truly so and typical due precisely to his background, Toranaga proves a hybrid of Japanese and Western cultures in his thinking, as he, unlike others, is open to alterity and ready to embrace some foreign elements that may determine other, more nationalistic Japanese, see him as “less than”, or even a traitor of his Japanese identity. These foreign elements are aspects concerning war strategy and weaponry: “Toranaga uses their relationship [his with Blackthorne] to strengthen his foothold as Japan's rightful leader, arming his men with guns and using western trickery to subdue his enemies” (*The Chicago Writer*). He is a combination of patience, intelligence and deceit while still managing well his noble aura, visible in the character's nickname of a “raccoon dog”: “clever and devious—yet generally likeable” (Smith, 1980, p. 59) – a walking paradox. Toranaga's hawking techniques hint at his manipulative nature (59). Moreover, they show the again ambivalent cruelty and loving nature that coexist in him, the equally puzzling and double admiration and despise he manifests for predators – which may point to awareness of his own nature, and to potential self-loathing as well. He realizes the frailty of beings fighting for survival employing tactics and strategies, which he manages to ultimately see and honor as their greatest strength. He manipulates the she-hawk but is fair to her in a sense in the end, giving her her freedom.

Mariko is first and foremost a Japanese samurai, and this to the end – if we may say so, both literally and figuratively. She is extremely devoted to Toranaga and gives up a potentially happy life with Blackthorne to fulfill the mission of serving her lord and his ends of supremacy in a way that involves the ultimate sacrifice. She is the one that comes up with a master plan that will bring Toranaga closer to his shogunate, and pursues it unfalteringly. She bravely puts herself in danger in a foreign land, at Taikō's court, confronting this leader and willingly making a demonstration and show of her defiance and potentially imminent *seppuku* only to prove a point. She manages to dodge death at this point, but not for long.

Although the fulfillment of her Japanese samurai identity obviously goes all the way, Mariko is a woman of multiple contrasts herself. She is Christian Catholic as well, bearing the name Maria, and in her mind there is no contradiction between serving her earthly lord, Toranaga, and God. Sacrifice of human life is explained by her as honorably performing one's duty and knowing one's place, having no vain pride. Arguments that she is really neither a true Christian nor an honorable Japanese wife could obviously be raised. Her truthfulness may also be questioned in relation to her love affair to Blackthorne, as she is betraying her husband, Buntaro. On the other hand, we may deny that the concept of betrayal applies in her situation, since Buntaro is a rude and violent husband, who has paid prostitutes from her own money while the love between them has vanished. She stays with Buntaro out of a sense of duty and is apparently his slave.

Women seem to have a subordinate position in relation to men, which is nevertheless subverted by some of Mariko's actions and attitudes. Buntaro seems to be subjugated by her and respect her in his own way (let us remember the tea he prepares for his wife). Also, Mariko's reasoning is often hinted at being superior to men's, in both her political and battlefield strategy suggestions to Toranaga and in her witticism in comparison to his, to which he yields and before which he declares himself inferior (in their haiku contest). Moreover, her outstanding courage far surpasses any of the other male characters' as well.

As we implied earlier, sexuality is one of the issues tackled in the novel whose prominence draws the reader's attention. What strikes Blackthorne (and perhaps us) at the beginning as shamelessness regarding sexuality on the part of the Japanese turns out to be open-mindedness. This perspective is gained as Blackthorne's closed mind becomes progressively open. He shifts perspectives, reaching a point where he sees their approach to sexual matters as healthy and logical, coming to embrace their habits. However, aspects such as zoophilia or pedophilia may raise ethical issues and block our perception of the Japanese as merely open-minded instead of depraved. It

is these issues that maintain ambiguity as far as characterizing them one way or another. Blackthorne may remain in this light the moral Christian and the epitome of normality, just as he may well be the frustrated, ignorant barbarian. The latter vision would be helped by taking into account his water/washing phobia and preconception that water brings diseases (at the beginning of the novel).

Not only characters are made ambiguous in the depiction of sexual habits, but Japanese sexuality itself. What we look at now is the double quality of Japanese sexuality in the novel. On the one hand, it sends to sensuousness and strictly pleasing the body. This is, however, only the surface of matters, as we are progressively made to understand that seeking pleasure in this sense is connected with a *carpe diem* attitude caused by dire awareness of one's fleeting nature in a world torn by conflict, war and natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. In this way, the attention granted to sexuality is transformed into a manifestation of spirituality, as it means celebrating the miracle of life. Life is viewed as a gift, whose constant reenactment resembles a thanking prayer for merely being alive. It is a manifestation of respect and acknowledgement of the gift.

Although the Japanese seem casual and relaxed in referring to sexual matters, which may create the impression of shamelessness, ambiguity on whether this feature really characterizes them is kept by the delicacy with which they avoid calling sexual body parts or encounters by their name, using euphemisms instead. This fact sometimes triggers puns and dialogues that are particularly comical. A man's phallus is called a "Peerless Pestle" (Clavell, 2009, p. 274), a deft lady of the Willow World a "Lady of the Night of the Screams" (273), the climax is touching the "Clouds and the Rain" (280), "Cloudburst" (1982) or the "Fire and the Torrent", sex is referred to as "matters of the pillow" (934) or "pillowing". It is perhaps a paradox that they emphasize politeness while the very fact of bringing up the subject and discussing it openly and directly may be considered rude.

In relation to the notion of freedom, the concept of karma displays an intriguing ambivalence. On the one hand, the existence of karma may lead to the idea that one is the master of one's destiny. All one does and only what one does is considered the decisive factor in the pleasantness of his/her destiny. Bad deeds lead to sorrow and misery, whereas good deeds lead to joy. The reverse of this type of thinking is that one's destiny is preordained, things are meant to be and, consequently, one can do nothing to change some of the events (s)he will be facing in life, as these have already been set as a result of past choices. These two aspects are noticed by LaFleur (LaFleur, 1980, p. 78).

Bun and *bu* – the cult of artistry and warriorship – is a *coincidentia oppositorum* that gets reflected in the personality of the samurai – a double, ambiguous one, since these values voice what (s)he is, and they are a marriage of antagonisms. The aestheticism of the carved details on the sword comes in stark contrast with it being an instrument of killing – see the testing of its sharpness on corpses (Smith, 1980, p. 91). As Smith notices, sadism and sensitivity are united in the personality of the samurai (91-2). Moreover, Smith points out the paradox of the samurai who needed to blend harmoniously in his/her attitude the “heart” and the “head”, namely *makoto* (sincerity), or innocence of motive, and administrative talents over their domains (93).

Finally, the philosophy that life is but a dream is not part of the Oriental world exclusively. It is present in Western and European culture and ideology as well, for instance as part of the mindset of European thinkers. Let us remember the words of the narrator in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff/As dreams are made on; and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep” (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 23). Later it came to be a feature present in Romanticism and Modernism and the *weltanschauung* of their representatives.

3. Conclusions

Shōgun is primarily very resourceful for intercultural awareness and the study of alterity, providing, despite some historical inaccuracies, a comprehensive picture of the Japanese customs and mentality of the time. Also, the protagonist’s conversion or coming full circle invites introspection. What we have analyzed above, namely the marked ambivalence of characters and situations, represents an in-depth understanding of the angles at which they can be considered. Ambivalence urges reconsiderations of binary and stereotypical thinking, and awareness that the gap between cultures is neither always that wide nor insurmountable if one is willing to see beyond appearances.

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