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## Interpreting Dazai's *Urashima san* vis-à-vis the conventional tale

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### Abstract

*Urashima Taro is a well-known Japanese folktale of medieval times in Japan, which has traversed time to exist in the public memory through its retelling over time and as part of the school textbooks in Japan in the modern period (1868~). The folktale has also entered modern Japanese literature in the post war period through Dazai Osamu's retelling in his collection Otagi Zoshi (Fairy tales) making it a work of modern Japanese literature. Dazai's version of the tale comes alive due to interesting narration and conversations between the turtle and the protagonist, while keeping intact the basic storyline. The paper focusses on bringing to light how the story as retold by Dazai Osamu questions long-standing conventions of class-consciousness in society fuelled by the turtle's questions and comments in conversation with Urashima Taro.*

**Keywords:** Urashima Taro, *Otagi Zoshi*, *Buraiha*, class-consciousness, Folktale.

### Introduction

Folktales are conventionally passed on orally from one person to another, making them stay alive in public memory of a people. Japan has a rich history of storytelling and one such collection of medieval times in Japan, namely the Muromachi period (1338-1573) is the *Otagi Zoshi* which can be translated into English as Fairy tales. These were compiled over a period of time, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century (Koida, p.1). This collection of tales refers to a collection of short tales from medieval period of Japan that were written largely for children. If one were to explore the literal meaning of *Otagi Zoshi* then the word *Otagi* refers to a companion who helps to overcome boredom (Mulhern, 1974, p. 1), while *Zoshi* are short stories or tales. The stories in other words are those that have been narrated orally, often to children in older times when 'reading' for children as we understand it today, translated into the act of being read to. The stories contain elements of fantasy, and the absurd and allude to Japan's history as well with a range of characters, such as princes, princesses, warriors, and commoners alike.

In modern Japan, (1868~), literature while charting new territories, assimilated new ideas that had entered the country from exposure to Western thoughts and ideas. At the same time, there was a trend to retain what was traditional and Japanese. Retelling of past stories, such as



Setsuwa *bungaku*<sup>i</sup> (Tale literature) by Akutagawa Ryunosuke and later Dazai Osamu in the postwar period are some such examples.

Dazai rewrote *Otogi Zoshi*, during World War 2 from a trench he was hiding in, with his family. He retold the tales, for his own daughter in the trying circumstances of war turning traditional folktales into literature. The paper aims to explore Dazai Osamu's *Urashima Taro* from a the perspective of the lower class tortoise, questioning cultural and social norms, which is representative of the group called *Buraiha* that he belonged to. The paper analyses verbal images as they appear in the retold story, and the narration, from the perspective of a decadent author who wrote for children based on the popular folktale *Urashima Taro*. The new perspectives on the characterisation of the turtle and *Urashima* present a tale with a similar plot but which helps question the identity of the two characters in the eyes of the readers as their own as well.

### Dazai Osamu's literary contribution

Dazai Osamu is often identified with a group of authors who were financially well off but deliberately associated with the have-nots i.e. the underprivileged people of society called *Buraiha* (decadents). Other authors who belonged to the group include Sakaguchi Ango, Ishikawa Jun, Ito Sei. Even though these authors did not have a unified ideology that defined them, they rebelled against established norms of what was conventionally accepted in the world of literature and outside it. The work in question also stresses on this aspect by challenging long established social norms and stereotypes associated with class and people who adhere to it.

Born as Tsushima Shuji into a wealthy family in Aomori prefecture of Japan, the author's discomfort with his privilege is reflected in his literary works. *Ningen Shikkaku*, 1948 (No Longer Human) and *Shayo*, 1947 (The Setting Sun) are some of his biggest contributions to Japanese literature in the postwar period. *Otogi Zoshi* by Dazai is a rewriting of stories originally written during the Muromachi period, while adding his own interpretation to them.

The author retains the original story in part in his rewritten version of the folktale, though it is not as well-researched as his other literary works. (Nagaike, 1997 p.3) The four stories that are included in his adaption are *Kobu Tori Jūsan* (The Stolen Wen), *Urashima Taro* (Urashima-san), *Kachi Kachi Yama* (Click Clack Mountain), and *Shita kiri Suzume* (The Sparrow who Lost her Tongue). The translation into English by Ralph F. Mc Carthy is referred to in this paper.



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## The many versions of Urashima-Taro

Characteristic of a folktale, Urashima-Taro has multiple versions, before Dazai Osamu wrote his own adaption of the tale. The tale has enjoyed popularity with the oldest version of the tale dating back to eighth century. (Mc Keon, 1996 p. 6)

However, most popularly known as a tale of medieval Japan, it lives in the popular memory owing to its incorporation in the school curriculum in modern Japan. The Ministry of Education Japan has a major role in impacting the popularity of the tale amongst young children since the Meiji period due to its inclusion in the textbooks of modern Japan since the year 1910 to before the end of the war in 1943. This written version of *Urashima Taro* in the textbooks of modern Japan has a version which most Japanese children in modern Japan consume and further narrate. (p.4)

Urashima Taro is a well-known folktale of a young fisherman Urashima Taro of noble descent who rescues a turtle from mischievous children who were bothering it and releases it back into the sea. The turtle meets the fisherman a few days later and expresses his wish to take the fisherman to the *Ryugujo* (Dragon Palace) as a gesture of repaying his gratitude for his kindness. Urashima accepts the invitation and visits the palace of Otohime princess and is completely taken over by the hospitality he receives. He however remembers his parents and expresses his wish to go back upon which he receives a gift from the princess, with a word of caution that the gift box should not be opened. Upon returning to land, Urashima finds that the village has completely changed and that his home and parents no longer existed, and it is then that he opens the box, from where smoke emerges, turning him to into an old man.

While the tale is conventionally narrated or read as one which imparts good values to children such as kindness to other creatures, or *ongaeshi* (repaying a favour), thereby justifying its continual existence in primary school textbooks for almost half a century, Dazai Osamu's adaption offers a new lens of looking at the story by offering layers to the otherwise glorified characters especially that of protagonist- Urashima of the tale. His adaption, while not being as popular as the conventional tale, is significant in bringing to light his own understanding of society, class and the privileges that it brings with it and his unease with it. While questioning societal norms associated with the nobility or the lower classes, rewritten as a tale for children, the author portrays his ideas which also reflect his affiliation to the *burai-ha*.



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**Urashima-san by Dazai Osamu**

Dazai Osamu's adds layers to the characters especially through the conversations that are mentioned between the character of Urashima Taro and the turtle. The turtle is instrumental in making the character of Urashima seem fallible, questioning the sense of entitlement he has, owing to his belonging to upper class society. The narrator has an active role and new components introduced by the author make an erstwhile folktale for children into a story with many added nuances, written in a humorous way for the intended reader.

As the introduction to the translation of the work states, "The air raids that devastated most of the large and medium -sized cities of Japan in the final year of World War II form a decidedly unconventional backdrop for Dazai Osamu's retellings of four well-known Japanese folk tales." (Cohn, 2019) The tales in the book were written in April 1945 and published as *The Fairy Tale Book*, in October the same year. With strict censorship laws in place, the author's choice of adapting *Otogi Zoshi* - traditional tales of Japan, can be seen as a safe and interesting choice. The author has used bold font in the story, indicating text from the erstwhile tale, underlining the connection with the original tale, while also demarcating the author's contribution to it.

**Challenging traditional tropes of high-class society**

Urashima Taro and the turtle are the two main characters in Dazai's story, between whom lengthy dialogues ensue. The story begins with Urashima Taro being introduced as a resident of Mizunoe of yore, the eldest son born into a family of privilege with servants, and a sense of style. His demeanour however is criticized by his own younger sister - "Dear brother, you just don't have a sense of adventure." (Dazai, 2019 p.24) Urashima Taro, however, does not lose his temper over such criticism and instead ponders on the questions of "Why can't people get along without criticizing one another?" (p.24) He roams on the beach thinking why people cannot learn to respect each other's chosen way? It is then that he comes across a feeble voice asking, "Excuse me" and as the narrator comments "This, of course is our famous problematic turtle." (p.25) Early in the tale, the narrator delineates the character of Urashima Taro as a person belonging to a high class and the turtle as a problematic creature! Thereafter, the various kinds of turtles are introduced, as motifs of long life, even more than a crane <sup>ii</sup>; also discussing the physical features of the many species.



In their first meeting, Urashima is startled and thinks it not very wise of the turtle to have ambled on the same beach from where he was rescued. The turtle tells him that he wishes to repay the favour that Urashima-san had done for him by taking him to the Dragon- palace and invites him to jump on his back for the ride to the said destination. However, Urashima's response to the invitation is met with surprise and disbelief. "The Dragon Palace? ...Of all the preposterous...The Dragon Palace exists only in poetry and fairy tales. It's not a real place. Do you understand?...you might say, that we men of refinement have indulged in since ancient times." (p.29) This in turn is met with scorn and laughter by the turtle, who does not seem to take the social class of Urashima-Taro seriously by saying "But save the lecture on refinement for later,... your problem is you've never had a taste of adventure." Urashima in turn says,

... I am not overly fond of this 'adventure' nonsense. Adventures are rather like acrobatics....in the end, boorish and worldly, ...Someone like myself, steeped as I am in the time-honoured tradition of gentlemanly refinement, cannot but hold the quest for adventure in scorn. I prefer to walk the straight, narrow, and tranquil oath trod by my predecessors. (p.30)

The turtle responds with a rebuttal stating that it is his misunderstanding to equate adventure with "blood and gore". The turtle admonishes people of high birth to be sceptics and miserly, saying that they are forever fearful of losing their possessions, while also blaming him for not being capable of accepting kindness owing to his scepticism. The conversation continues with Urashima Taro emphasising how he was destined for a loftier destiny than the turtle was, accusing the turtle of trying to drag him to his own level. "You feed me this outlandish tale about taking me to the Dragon Palace to associate with me on equal footing, but my dear fellow...I know exactly what you're up to." (p.32) He then goes on to tell the turtle about how he should go back to where he belonged-the bottom of the sea. The turtle however was not to be cowed down for this diatribe and interjects.

You think that your own acts of kindness are proof of a higher morality, and deep down inside you feel you deserve some sort of reward. But if someone shows you are little kindness, you're mortified. God forbid you should have to associate with someone like me as if we were equals right?... The only reasons you helped me out was because I'm a turtle and my tormentors were children." (p.32)



In other words, he insinuated that Urashima-Taro had not really performed an act of valour and had used what was a meagre sum of money for him –five coppers- to bribe the children troubling him and called him a snob for boasting of lofty birth and ideals. Urashima is taken aback by his confession however, “Hey, you’re not angry, are you? I love you, after all-or don’t you want to hear that?”(p.33) even as he admonished Urashima Taro about how people of his standing find it disgraceful to be admired by people of lowly birth, let alone a turtle. He professed how his love was not governed by factors of his standing in society, or that he had rescued him, reiterating his intention of meeting as only having fun together and nothing else.

### **Dragon Palace: A place that upturns conventions and stereotypes**

Once they reach the Dragon Palace, the turtle says, “You won’t find people disturbing the peace by criticizing one another down there. Life in the Dragon Palace is gentle, leisurely, live-and-let-live.” (p.33) The turtle then compares life on land with life under the sea saying how stressful life is on land in comparison, where everyone is more critical than in the sea, and much more negative. Having lived at both places the turtle even compares how the life under the sea while being much more peaceful can be dull at times in comparison to that on land and even ponders about which of the places he really belongs to. His experience at both places makes him doubt his own identity. Dazai seems to subtly hint at the advantage that the turtle may have over the protagonist owing to this experience.

Urashima Taro is finally convinced of the Dragon Palace’s existence and climbs onto the turtle’s back and goes on the ride to the bottom of the sea. The way to the dragon palace is tumultuous, however upon reaching the place, Urashima Taro is pleasantly surprised by the beauty of it, its depth. What meets his eyes is a beautiful light, silence and peace and huge schools of fish amounting to more than 2 to 3 million. The turtle also introduces Urashima Taro to some ‘unbelievable’ concepts of how excess water is burnt in the Dragon palace, the concept of a quaint calendar that traces shadows of heavenly bodies and so on and so forth. It is only upon reaching the entrance of the place that the turtle reveals to Urashima Taro how he was the first ever human to have even come as far, “In fact, you’re the first human being that’s ever passed through here. Probably the last too.” (p.39) This sentence is significant in showing how the two worlds of the so-called haves and have nots differ with little intersection, let alone interaction.

The sight of white peaks is also spellbinding for Urashima Taro who understands them to be snow mountains, but he is educated about it, that it does not snow underneath the ocean but



that the mountains or rather hills are pearls! Urashima is taken for a guided tour around the Dragon Palace and is reminded to take off his shoes, and at times of being watchful about watching his step as he walked through the Dragon Palace. It is pertinent when the turtle remarks to Urashima, “Just as there’s no snow down here, my friend: the turtle says in a suddenly affectionate tone, “there’s no rain either. Which means there’s no need to build those horribly confining walls and ceilings and things, the way they do on land.” (p.42) The statement is challenged by Urashima pointing out how there was a roof to the gate, only to be chastened again by Urashima Taro about how the princess chambers had these for her privacy. The walls of human society for demarcating what belongs to oneself and to alienate the others is missing in the ocean’s Dragon palace, as is revealed to Urashima Taro.

Urashima is also taken aback at the realisation that he had been walking on very small fish...and feels that it is very vulgar to be doing something like this again to be told by the fish themselves that they feel no pain, and that they are entranced by the music being played by Princess Oto on the harp. His experiences and the barbs by the turtle had made Urashima wonder if what he believed or saw was real “I no longer know what to believe, and it’s getting harder and harder to care. This is exactly what I find so distasteful about adventure.” (p.45) This dialogue reveals the unease of how Urashima witnesses the new world order, where he is not the most powerful or elite being. It is perhaps this sense of entering the unknown realm which is referred to as adventure by the turtle and his own siblings- making him experience a new order of things where he had to rewire all his perceptions to take in the new realities he encountered.

Even for the turtle, a dilemma that he struggles with, is expressed in” I am somewhere in between, I guess, like the bat- is it a bird or a beast? - and its getting harder and harder for me to stay put in my own home.” (p.34 ) He seems to be appealing to Urashima about the merits of Dragon Palace. The expanse of the sea and its beauty and its marvels of fires underwater, of heavenly objects casting shadows, of mountains with peaks covered in pearls, and its depth are revealed to Urashima as he sits on the back of the turtle. The quiet of the palace and its roofless nature are all new to him. Besides this, the hospitality that is extended to him is also different from what would be the norm on land- by way of offering tasty eats. Urashima Taro slowly realises the act that is put up by people on land when they try to host a guest, by offering food.

Further, the tune that he hears in the palace, is *seitei* ‘(Divine Resignation) and Urashima Taro realises how life is noble in the Dragon Palace and is of a very different kind than he had



known thus far. It is in the palace that Urashima reveals how he hates the idea of getting old and ugly and is not as afraid of dying. He utters this when eating cherries in the Dragon Palace known for helping longevity. It is upon being made to realise of Princess Oto's presence that Urashima suddenly feels awkward even as he is a nobility himself. "Unlimited License" (p.56) is something that he had experienced for the first time ever. However, after some time Urashima starts missing his earlier life and takes leave of the Princess in the Dragon Palace. He wanted to stay on, even as he knew he had to go back. The turtle explains how he would be better off not opening the shell of the box he had received at the palace-fearing unusual phenomena to occur.

### **Return to land: An Act of Divine Resignation**

Urashima returns to land wanting to share his experience with his family and parents...however what he realises upon his return is that there is no village, house or people as he had known them. He then opens the shell revealing his human weakness and is transformed into a 300-year-old man. It was a way of granting him unlimited license...for the ten more years he lived for thereafter as the tale narrates.

The narrator and the turtle's role in the retold story lend a new perspective to it by questioning the very essence of things that people may remember the story Urashima Taro by such as those of the hero rescuing the turtle thereby making him a heroic figure and the turtle a weak animal that needs rescuing. It questions the human world order of valuing existing conventions of wealth, class and youth perhaps, and its own perception of humans as superior beings.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, Dazai's *Urashima Taro* provides new perspectives that challenge the conventional position of Urashima as a saviour and as an upper-class person, and the turtle as a weak creature, who is rescued. To do this, the story is retold, using long winding conversations which are witty and humorous and led often by the turtle than the conventional protagonist-Urashima Taro. The turtle takes on an important role of making Urashima rethink, re-evaluate and question long held perception on society and high class and the things that he feels entitled to as a result. Dazai's rewritten story is a medium that helps to reflect on the long-accepted norms of society, of stereotyping human beings, especially of high class as superior, and in turn their condescending nature when it comes to the treatment they mete out to others. The process results





in the two main characters of the tale uneasy in their stipulated roles at times, with Urashima Taro's unease with his exalted position in society and the tortoise unable to accept the tag of a weaker being given to him who needs to be rescued.

Unlike the central role played by Urashima Taro in the conventional folktale, the turtle plays a pivotal role in the retold story, through his interventions on the surface of the earth, in the ocean and Dragon palace, making Urashima review his own perceptions of the world as he sees it. The turtle is instrumental in making Urashima realise the limitations of conventional upper-class values and thinking passed on in society, such as class consciousness and a sense of superiority. Urashima starts the journey with the turtle with resistance and surprise initially, followed by trust and compliance with the turtle and eventually resigns to where he is led -in the ocean and upon returning to the land. The author skilfully expresses these ideas through the protagonist's conversations with the turtle, making one ponder on the rationality of social conventions in human society based on his experiences.

Dazai's retold story with the change in the perspective of narration, is not openly moralistic like conventional folktales, but it is more open to questioning the tropes of nobility, of the so-called weaker sections of society represented by the tortoise. Turning the story's narrative upside down is a technique that the author has used to express his ideas of rebellion and opposition to existing structures and socially accepted norms as a *buraiha* author. However, since the period of war was one of strict restrictions imposed on books, the tale was an interesting choice for the author to express his opinion through the folktale, largely catering to children as its readers. It opens norms to interpretation, through skillfull narration and change of perspective of the author as illustrated above.

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## Notes

i Setsuwa Bungaku of Japan is a broad term used to refer to narratives with Buddhist themes with many famous collections under the genre from as early as 9th century in Japan.

ii Crane in Japan, known as Tsuru in Japanese, is a bird that symbolises longevity and has been used in famous literary works as well.



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