

Beyond National Borders: A Transcultural Reading of Indian Ethical Thoughts in Michiko Aoyama's *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*

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Abstract

This article explores Indian ethnic thoughts in Japanese healing fiction through transculturality. Contemporary Japanese healing fiction is often regarded as a genre that enables both characters and readers to experience catharsis by offering a space to momentarily step away from real-world worries, reflect on problems, and find ways to overcome them. However, the philosophical actions of the characters that lead to the creation of such a safe haven, which purges the characters and the readers alike, are often overlooked. What You Are Looking For Is in the Library by Michiko Aoyama is one such Japanese healing fiction in which this oversight occurs. However, drawing on Wolfgang Iser's theory of transculturality, this study offers a transcultural reading of this Japanese novel that reveals ethical resonance beyond national borders and brings it into dialogue with Indian ethical thought. This transcultural connection explains how the deliberate diction (vak), strategic silence (mouna), conscious compassion (karuna), and altruistic act (seva) of the librarian, Ms. Komachi Sayuri, with a sense of duty (dharma) and equality (samatva), help the characters overcome their predicaments by finding their right path (svadharma) and serve to attain social harmony (lokasamgraha) and connect a Japanese novel with Indian philosophical ideas. Incorporating in-depth qualitative analysis, this study attempts to

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show how the librarian's actions can be interpreted through the lens of Indian ethical thoughts into everyday actions and speech to help people irrespective of their demographic or social status. This article reconceptualises nation-building not as a political act but as a daily deed that builds people's well-being and contributes to the betterment of society and the nation, one step at a time.

Keywords: Transculturality, Indian Philosophy, Japanese Healing Fiction, Nation-Building, Compassion, Social Harmony

Introduction

The Japanese healing fiction *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*, by Michiko Aoyama, explores the lives of five individuals from different walks of life who visit the same library during a period of self-doubt, self-denigration, and quandary. Their encounter with the librarian, her weighted words, and selfless actions helped the individuals overcome their troubles and find their path in life. . “Most scholars working on the concept of transculturality consider it a modern phenomenon, but we can discover forms of transculturality already in the Middle Ages, and this in terms of political, scholarly, artistic, medical and literary exchanges” (Classen 133). Transculturality as a modern concept was popularised by Wolfgang Welsch. Welsch in his essay, “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today” observes, “The concept of transculturality sketches a different picture of the relation between cultures. Not one of isolation and of conflict, but one of entanglement, intermixing and commonness. It promotes not separation, but exchange and interaction” (194). A transcultural study of this novel highlights similarities between Indian ethical thought and Japanese everyday practices. It does not blend or separate them, but shows how, over time, cultures have influenced each other and share more ethics than disparities.

Aim and Objectives

To examine how the similarity in Indian ethical thought and Japanese everyday practice comes from a common point of reflection and intends to build a nation by aiding one person at a time to add to the collective wellness.

The objectives of this research are:

- ◆ To explore Indian ethical thoughts in Japanese everyday practices.
- ◆ To investigate how a nation can be built as a whole by helping each individual who makes up the nation.
- ◆ To inspect how a nation can be built through ethical practices instead of wars and politics.
- ◆ To analyse how transculturality can be used to navigate the kindred spiritual essence beyond the border and connect India and Japan.

- ◆ To probe how the ethical practices of a single person can benefit a whole society.
- ◆ To scrutinize how a harmonious society can be created with consciousness help rather than paltry politics.
- ◆ To explore how the actions of a character from a Japanese novel reflects Indian ethical thought without homogenising the cultures.
- ◆ To delve into the philosophical teachings of healing fiction going beyond common pleasure reading.

Discussion

In the novel, Ms. Komachi Sayuri is the librarian at Hatori Community House's common library. She is usually seen in the reference section, where visitors go for book recommendations. Ms. Komachi is skilful in her work, and she gets the book recommendations requested by the visitors at lightning speed. However, in addition to this, she is prudent, as she notices the dilemmas of the visitors and gives them additional unexpected book recommendations to help with their predicaments. Throughout this whole process, the most noteworthy action beyond her mysterious book recommendations is her habit of speaking solely what is necessary to pique the visitors and make them reflect on their actions and problems from different perspectives, and quitting the conversation as soon as what is necessary is spoken so that the visitors can find the solution by themselves while growing more understanding and confident in the process. She helps all the visitors equally without prying into their privacy. While treating the visitors with empathy, she makes sure not to overstep their boundaries or become their personal therapist. While dutifully performing her duties as a librarian, Ms. Komachi, with her compassionate heart, helps individuals discover their personal duty and the path they are bound to tread. "Compassion has been shown to improve well-being across multiple settings" (Zhuniq et al. 1). Together, from a holistic perspective, they guide society toward harmony by helping one person at a time.

Vak and *Mauna*

Vak is the vitality of words, while *mauna* is the mastery of silence. The balance between these two is necessary to maintain external expression while also listening to inner intellectual reflections. The practice of choosing words, which have immense power and take a great amount of energy to be formed in thought and articulated in speech and create an impactful effect on the speaker and listener once uttered, is highly valued, as it not only conserves the energy of the speaker but declutters the minds of the listeners, ensuring that the message being communicated is transmitted skillfully. Words should be carefully chosen before articulation, as words have the power to create both life and chaos. In "Letter to George Bainton" Mark Twain says, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (87-88). It underscores the value of using the right words to create the envisioned outcome. Considering this, the librarian Ms. Komachi Sayuri carefully chooses her

words to create a self-reflective effect on the listeners.

According to yogic practices, silence brings stillness to the mind, bringing clarity of thought and balance of mind. Jiddu Krishnamurti, in *Freedom from the Known*, states, “And it is only in silence that you can observe the beginning of thought—not when you are searching, asking questions, waiting for a reply” (86). Ms. Komachi’s silence is as strategic as her words. While her words make visitors think, her silence keeps them from expecting more solutions from her. Krishnamurti further observes, “And space and silence are necessary because it is only when the mind is alone, uninfluenced, untrained, not held by infinite varieties of experience, that it can come upon something totally new” (88). In this world, though people live in communities, they are individual beings. They have their own problems to tackle and successes to achieve. Only an individual can solve their own problems and earn their own merit. From this problem and success aspect, everyone else, even family and friends, are outsiders because problems are something the people facing them should tackle by themselves to improve their confidence, understanding of life, and attachment to existence, as solving one’s own problem makes them feel content and worthy. Having a clear understanding of this, Ms. Komachi, instead of giving the answers to the visitors on a platter, helps them figure it out themselves. She realised that instead of solving the problem, developing the mindset and perspective to overcome their predicament is what will help them in the long run and will also help them improve the quality of their life. Her *mauna* is what helps her fulfil this principle. She tactfully doesn’t say anything more than necessary. She prompts the person with her words, piques their thoughts into self-reflection, and leaves them to figure things out by themselves. This can be inferred from her conversation with Natsumi Sakitani, the working mother who comes to the library to get picture books for her daughter but surprisingly gets a book recommendation for herself from the librarian. After saying her piece to Ms. Sakitani, Ms. Komachi goes back to continue her felting. Ms. Sakitani describes the scene as, “Ms. Komachi said nothing. She looked down at the ball of wool once again and began stabbing at it impassively. Apparently, she was no longer interested in talking to me. It was hard to say anything more, with her body language signaling that she had done her duty” (116). This line shows that she stopped the visitors from asking her for more answers or directions and made them look for them themselves.

Seva and Svadharma

Seva is a service performed to help someone without expecting any repayment or reward. According to Yogapedia, “Seva is a Sanskrit word that describes the act of selfless service.” It further explains that “The act of seva leads to collective benefit and gain, although it is performed without regard for the outcome of the individual” (“Seva”). Thus, the practice of seva emphasises selfless service that benefits both the individual receiving help and the wider community. The only fruit people who practice *seva* reap is peace of mind and fulfilment in their hearts.

Ms. Komachi helps the visitors who come to the library. Each has their own unique problems, and she helps them in unexpected ways. Her different perspective helps her understand the problems the visitors face. Helping others without expectations and making them find their own solutions serves a dual purpose. It helps Ms. Komachi free herself from any attachments and selflessly continue her *seva*. It also helps the visitors rely on their own efforts and savour the path to consuming the fruit of their conquest. Getting answers directly makes them focus only on the result and erases the essence of the path to attain it from their minds. Hence, this *seva* of directing to but not distributing the solution helps people from focusing solely on the result and growing anxious. It helps them understand and enjoy the process, to satiatingly savour it and feel fulfilled just from their actions instead of the attached outcomes. Here, helping each and every visitor with their personal problems by empathising with them enough to guide them towards finding their own path might not be a duty which Ms. Komachi is obligated to do. However, she has a spirit of *seva*. *Seva* is selfless service performed purely to give help to people who need it and without expecting anything in return. The visitors who had professional, personal, psychological, and existential crises all received help.

Svadharmā is an act of helping individuals find their unique and righteous path that they should stride to fulfil the purpose of their life. “Svadharmā: Key Aspects & Its Role in Governance” states:

Svadharmā, derived from Sanskrit where ‘sva’ means “one’s own” and ‘dharma’ means “duty, righteousness, or moral order”, translates to “one’s duty”. It is a personalised ethical obligation that varies based on an individual’s position in society, inherent qualities, and stage of life. (PMF IAS CA Team)

Each visitor to the library not only has unique problems, but the route they must follow to triumph over them is also distinct, as each person serves an individual and remarkably singular purpose in the world. Ms. Komachi guides Tomoka Fujiki, a young girl working as a sales representative, into realising the importance of recognising the value of things one already possesses. Ryo Urase expects to quit his current job one day and open an antique business. His dilemma can be inferred when he says, “One day when I have enough money saved up, I will quit my job, find somewhere to open a shop, and curate the shelves. . . One day. . .” (50). With Ms. Komachi’s aid, he realises the need to balance both his passion and profession to achieve his goal. Natsumi Sakitani, a working mother who aspires to become an editor while taking care of her child, realises she can start over irrespective of her age, her hard work never goes futile, and that something considered a disadvantage can become a boon with a shift in the situation. Hirayo Suda, a talented artist with a peculiar artistic sense, understands that his art does not need to be accepted by everyone to leave a mark in the world. Masao Gonno, a retired man who feels detached from society, learns that all the days of his life are the same and that they cannot be treated as useful or just as remnants just based on his employment status. Ms. Komachi’s sagacious practice of *seva* and *savdharmā* helps the visitors find

clarity when life seems to be disoriented.

Karuna and Samatva

Karuna means compassion. From “What Is Compassion (Karuna) in Buddhism?” it can be gleaned that:

Compassion (Pali and Sanskrit: *karuna*) is the wish that others be free from suffering. . . Compassion goes beyond sympathy or empathy. Practicing compassion allows us to recognize the suffering and difficulties that all living beings experience and respond with a genuine desire to alleviate that suffering. It’s a deep and active form of empathy that motivates compassionate action. (Lion’s Roar)

This is the most important ethical thought that Ms. Komachi has integrated into her system of service. Ms. Komachi empathetically understands the woes of the visitors; however, she practices *karuna* and stops herself from disregarding the privacy of the visitors and barging into their lives as a therapist, advisor, or counsellor. She serves as an empathetic ear and helpful herald, listening to visitors without judgment and offering unique thoughts that help them seek solutions on their own. She does not offer direct answers, as it might make visitors dependent on her, which could do more harm than good. She understands that true *seva* and *karuna* lie in just clearing the veiling mist a bit so that the lost person can find the way and walk it by themselves instead of holding the person’s arms and taking them across the road. Hence, she just pushed them to think for themselves. When Tomoka Fujiki was pessimistic about her work, she said, “It’s not like it was my dream job or anything I desperately wanted to do. I just kind of fell into it. But I live on my own, so I have to work to support myself” (19-20). Ms. Komachi observed, “You managed to find employment, you go to work every day, and you can feed yourself. That’s a fine achievement” (20). This conversation was enlightening to Tomoka, as she had never thought about it that way. This is Ms. Komachi’s way of helping each and every visitor by introducing them to a new perspective with which they can view their own lives in a new light.

Samatva is the practice of treating everyone with equal respect and compassion. *Samatva* is equanimity. Jijina, Vasa and Biswas in their article “Construct description of Samatva from the Bhagavad Gita: Implications for Holistic Well-being” explain that:

In the Monier-Williams dictionary, the Sanskrit words Sama, Samata or Samatva are translated as equanimity. They further elaborate that, a person with Samatva goes beyond the superficial outer appearances, does not discriminate, and sees all beings as part of a unifying consciousness. (6)

This can be seen in how Ms. Komachi listens to every visitor with patience, regards them without judgment, and helps them irrespective of their predicaments. Tomoka Fujiki is a 21-year-old woman who works as a womenswear sales representative at Eden, a chain of general merchandise stores. She lives alone and is pessimistic about her work. Ryo Urase is a 35-year-old man working in the accounts

department of a furniture manufacturing company named Kishimoto. He lives alone but has a girlfriend and wants to quit his job to start his own antique shop. Natsumi Sakitani is a 40-year-old working mother. She works at Banyusha, a publishing company. She lives with her husband and child and tries to balance work and motherhood while pursuing her professional ambitions. Hiroya Suda is a 30-year-old unemployed man who stopped trying after many failures. He lives with his mom and dreams of becoming an artist. Masao Gonno is a 65-year-old retired man who lives with his wife and feels unacknowledged by society after retirement. All five visitors come from completely different walks of life. They differ not only in demographic indicators like age, gender, and profession, but also in socio-cultural, socio-economic, personal, psychological, experiential, and existential backgrounds. However, Ms. Komachi treats all the visitors and their problems with *samatva* and contributes to the first step towards a harmonious society. A society where every individual is heard, regarded with care and respect, and is supported is a harmonious society, and it is the main element in building a strong nation. Ms. Komachi understands this and acts with ethical caution and concern.

Dharma and Lokasamgraha

Dharma is the act of performing one's own duties with assiduity and dedication. Yogapedia explains "Dharma" as, "The implication of dharma is that there is a right or true way for each person to carry out their life in order to serve both themselves and others" ("Dharma").

Ms. Komachi is a diligent librarian who gives careful recommendations to all the visitors seeking her in the reference section of the library. Rather than viewing librarianship as merely a job of handling books, Ms. Komachi sees it as a way to help people gain the knowledge they need to overcome their struggles and improve their lives. She recognises the value of wisdom as a key to helping people enlighten themselves and forge their own righteous path. She helps the visitors attain personal growth and societal stability through learning. She recommends the children's book, *Guri and Gura* to Tomoka Fujiki and helps her realise what she already has. Ryo Urase received, *Royal Horticultural Society: How Do Worms Work? A Gardener's Collection of Curious Questions and Astonishing Answers*, as his book recommendation, and learns that passion and profession should complement each other like the root and shoot of a plant. *Door to the Moon* helps Natsumi Sakitani understand that people have two eyes, the sun (logical perspective) and moon eye (emotional perspective), and they should be selectively used in different situations for better comprehension and results. Hiroya Suda's recommended book, *Evolution: A Visual Record* makes him realise that even uncommon ideas are appreciated and helps him rediscover his creative spark. This is clear when he says, "A lot of the photos in *Evolution: A Visual Record* had been giving me the same kind of creative itch that *Confuciusornis* had" (189). The poetry collection, *Genge and Frogs*, helps Masao Gonno realise that life changes with perspective and that every day in a person's life is equally important.

In *Lokasamgraha*, *loka* means the “world” and *samgraha* means “holding together” and “protecting”. *Lokasamgraha* is the act of keeping the world and humanity united by protecting their harmony. Ms. Komachi, the librarian, is the one assisting the society through *lokasamgraha*. Instead of just doing her job and looking after her own life, she lives as a devoted human being, constantly and mindfully trying to help those around her to the best of her ability. With her aid, the visitor not only gains clarity but also undergoes self-transformation that helps them clear up their misunderstandings with their families through better communication and also strengthens their individual bond with the world, making them more responsible pillars of society who better their own lives and, consequently, make the world a better place to exist in. In the article, “*Lokasamgraha*: A Model for Ethical and Social Governance in the Contemporary World,” Anushka Verma describes *lokasamgraha* as, “It emphasizes performing actions not solely for oneself but also for the benefit of others, in a selfless and disinterested manner, with the aim of forming unity and promoting the welfare of humanity” (Verma). As Verma observes, Ms Komachi’s actions favour the betterment of society more than her personal gain. Following ethical philosophical teachings, she serves humanity and guides them towards unity and solidarity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identifies Indian philosophical thought in the everyday actions of Ms. Komachi in the Japanese novel *What You Are Looking For Is in the Library*. This study shows that Japanese everyday practices and Indian philosophical thought share a spiritual essence that embodies the desire to create a harmonious society and a peaceful nation. The systemic practices of Ms. Komachi Sayuri depict Indian philosophical thought in Japanese literature and bring out their kindred spiritual essence. Transcultural reading helps analyse the two cultures as mutually influential rather than homogenising them or strictly separating them. It shows how the ethical thoughts of both countries have influenced each other and how both countries desire to build a stronger nation with emotionally, socially, and psychologically healthy people instead of violent wars and demeaning politics. Additionally, it illustrates that healing fiction can go beyond simple pleasure reading and can convey philosophical lessons that can influence a person’s everyday life and a nation’s development.

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