

**The Post-War Amnesia and Memory Crisis in Osamu Dazai's
*No Longer Human***

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Abstract

This paper examines Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* (1948) as a vital counter-memory text that exposes the psychological crisis and state-enforced amnesia of post-WWII Japan. Following the 1945 surrender, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) implemented an invisible, total system of censorship through the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD), forcing the Japanese public to selectively forget wartime trauma and past atrocities. By reading Dazai's novel through John W. Dower's historical framework of the *kyodatsu* condition, a state of severe socio-cultural prostration and spiritual exhaustion. This paper demonstrates how the protagonist Oba Yozo's individual psychological collapse serves as a localized, somatic symptom of a nation forced to surgically erase its history.

Keywords: Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*, Counter-Memory, Postwar Japanese Censorship, *Kyodatsu* Condition

In September 1945, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) announced an absolute freedom of speech to the defeated Japanese public. A paradoxical directive, as this freedom was closely policed by the secret machinations of the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD). To transform Japan into a stable, democratic Cold War ally, the American-led occupation enacted an invisible system of total narrative control. Under the Code for the Japanese Press, the public was forced to selectively forget the catastrophic details of its immediate past. Censors

banned references to radiation sickness in Hiroshima, poetry on the blasts, prohibited depictions of black-market survival, and words like *teki* (enemy) or *ketōjin* (hairly foreigner) were removed from the texts to be replaced with more neutral words. Most importantly, SCAP mandated that the censorship itself remain entirely invisible, publishers could not use the traditional blank spaces (*fuseji*) to signal deleted text, forcing them to smoothly rewrite their manuscripts to feign an illusion of absolute liberty.

It is within this landscape of state-enforced, invisible amnesia that Osamu Dazai published *No Longer Human* (*Ningen Shikkaku*) in 1948. The novel does not directly mention SCAP, nor does it explicitly detail wartime atrocities. Yet, its structural obsession with concealment, self-curation, and psychological fragmentation makes it a vital “memory text” that directly mirrors Japan's broader cultural crisis. By examining how the protagonist, Oba Yozo, attempts to conceal his own trauma through compulsive “clowning” and defensive self-presentation, Dazai provides a profound counter-memory to the forced optimism of the Shōwa era. Ultimately, Yozo's individual psychological collapse serves as a localized, somatic symptom of a nation forced to surgically erase its own history.

This phase of outsourced democratization in history of Japan has been studied at length by historian John W. Dower. In his 1999 work, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, Dower talks about this political restructuring and how it left an indelible mark on the nation. Dower writes, “World War II did not really end for the Japanese until 1952, and the years of war, defeat, and occupation left an indelible mark on those who lived through them. No matter how affluent the country later became, these remained the touchstone years for thinking about national identity and personal values.”

Dazai's *No Longer Human*, published in the midst of this phase, captures what Dower calls the “indelible mark” on the macro-historical and translates it into an individual's psychological portrayal. The novel represents the crisis of personal values, identity and memory through the protagonist, Oba Yozo. Dazai internalizes the fractured national identity of a country trapped between the ruins of imperial fascism and the artificial, censored democracy of the US occupation in the protagonist.

Yozo's profound alienation can be seen as localized symptom of broader crisis. Dower names this crisis as "Kyodatsu Condition". He takes the term from the Japanese medicine and psychology nomenclature, used to describe a state of severe clinical prostration, shock, or collapse in individual patients. Dower popularised the concept in Western academia as a socio-historical diagnostic tool. He analysed how a clinical term rapidly transformed into a nationwide catchphrase. The *kyodatsu condition* (*kyodatsu jōtai*) was used to describe the macro-level trauma, spiritual lethargy, and cultural disorientation felt by Japanese citizens following the 1945 surrender.

In the novel, Yozo's compulsive "clowning", which he describes as his coping mechanism against humanity, can be seen as the literary manifestation of societal "Kyodatsu" by Dazai. The awareness of alienation in case of Yozo is acute. Since his childhood, he recognizes that his survival depends on performing a farce that distracts people from his inner reality. The clowning is more of an emotional desensitization, an act of self-defence, a self-induced numbness, designed to mask the terror of existence. His comedy is calculative, as he writes,

"This was my offer of courtship to humankind. I thought, 'As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be alright. If I succeed, then the people won't pay too much attention to me, or notice that I am standing outside their lives.'"

This echoes the collective protective numbness of the post-war population. Who performed the motions of daily life to distract from the ideological displacement. The immense psychological labour of maintaining the façade is resulting in the collective exhaustion and lethargy mentioned in *Kyodatsu Condition*. As Yozo writes,

"I was frantically playing the clown from morning till night... holding my breath, gasping, my face a distorted mask of comedy, while beneath it I was in an agony of sweat and terror."

This juxtaposition between the public mask and the private panic perfectly captures the underlying tension of the *Kyodatsu* state, where the performative adaptation to a new social order could never truly soothe the internal trauma of defeat. The vulnerability of this defensive structure is exposed when a classmate whispers to Yozo, "You did it on purpose." Yozo's reaction to this was a black out. He felt that 'the world went entirely black', which signals a profound vulnerability. To have the performative nature of the mask exposed threatens to collapse the fragile boundaries keeping his trauma at bay.

The framing of the novel also works as an aid to build a tension between performance and the repressed history. Dazai starts with an indifferent narrator describing Oba Yozo's three photographs before the readers arrive at Yozo's written diaries.

These photographs work as a flawed archive, as they obscure Yozo's life instead of documenting it. The first photograph describes the unnatural smile of Oba Yozo as a child in a family photograph, surrounded by cousins and sisters. The narrator says that the smile is unlike a human child. Then again, in the second photograph, the readers are given the same explanation, although Oba Yozo seems like a handsome, young man, his smile invites a dread in the narrator. It lacks vitality of a human, he says. Similarly, in the third photograph, Yozo is simply sitting in a messy corner of the room, but the photograph is terrifying to the narrator. Yozo's face has lost all distinct features. It is a completely expressionless, blank slate. The narrator states that if you close your eyes after looking at it, you cannot remember a single detail about the face.

The un-canny, unhuman aspect of Yozo's face has been talked about again and again while describing all these photographs. Meanwhile, his identity keeps transforming from a mask, to a sham, to ultimately an absolute void. It can be seen as a progressive erasure of his identity. The first photograph is representative of the birth of this mask. In his childhood, he understood being a happy kid was a good self-defence strategy. He smiles to please others and narrator sees the adult like cunning in that smile. In the second photograph, the mask has already taken over the identity of Yozo and narrator sees a hollow smile on a perfectly handsome face. By the third

photograph, Yozo's self has been dissolved completely and what narrator witness is a void. It is the price that Yozo pays for performing in the place of risking an exposure of his real self.

This progression mirrors the trajectory of post-war Japan under the SCAP (Supreme Commander for Allied Powers) censorship. Starting from a forced compliance to ensure safety to structural erasure of trauma and resulting void or *Kyodatsu*.

The deliberate removal and blackening of anything written against the democratizing aliens, wartime atrocities, and immediate suffering under SCAP's censorship can be seen represented in the faceless face of Yozo in the end. His face is a redacted document. A reminder of the forced historical amnesia.

Dazai sets *No Longer Human* in 1930s but it mirrors the reality of the times it was written and published. By placing Yozo in the pre-war era dealing with the Thought Police (*Tokkō*) and the illegal Communist Party, Dazai subtly represents the contemporary 1948 reality. Yozo's terror of "The World" (*Seken*) is the terror of a citizen living under an omnipresent occupying force whose rules are absolute but completely alien.

Another form of shrouded narrative technique employed by Dazai is making Yozo's body as the site of decadence. In 1948 Tokyo, black-market drug addiction (particularly smuggled opiates) was rampant among the traumatized, starving population. SCAP heavily restricted reporting on this epidemic to maintain an image of successful occupation. By charting Yozo's horrific descent into morphine addiction and his confinement to an asylum, Dazai smuggles the raw reality of 1948 *kyodatsu jōtai* (exhaustion) that the CCD censors passed without issue.

As literary historian Michael Molasky notes in his work *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*, writers during this period frequently turned to the individual form to anchor larger historical anxieties. He observes that "the eroticism of the postwar writers marks a quite different approach to the body." The writers were utilizing body as a primary canvas to process

the unspoken violence of the era. Yozo Oba's systematic physical dissolution is a result of this literary technique.

Using body as the site of decadence was a common stylistic choice made by most *Buraiha* writers. Dazai and his contemporaries, Sakaguchi Ango, and Oda Sakunosuke, are considered the prime proponents of this style. The *Buraiha* writers saw self-destruction as an active political stance. Between the collapsed wartime military regime and the incoming, hyper-sanitized democratization engine of SCAP, they refused to transition from one state-mandated ideology to the next.

When caught between two ideologies after the World-war surrender, these writers refused to be of use to either of them. *Buraiha* writers wrote about the *panpan* (streetwalker), the drug addict, and the black-market drifter. They made the invisible, wounded psychological reality of Japan visible through their own bodily decay.

Douglas Slymaker talks about the representations of bodily decadence by *Buraiha* writers in detail in his work, *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction*. He writes, "the early postwar *Buraiha* utilized a calculated degradation of the self to put flesh on their intellectual coup d'état of subverting the official order."

The sub-genre of Flesh Literature (*Nikutai Bungaku*) under *Buraiha* writers, explicitly used the raw, debased human body to protest against the sanitized, state-mandated narrative enforced by the SCAP occupation.

In *No Longer Human*, we witness Yozo's fall into morphine addiction and sexual promiscuity. He has carnal relations with several prostitutes and barmaids like Tsuneko. In the light of *Buraiha* style, it should be seen as Dazai's argument against the performed propriety of the Post-war Japan. The other *Buraiha* Texts dealing with similar themes are, *The Idiot* by Sakaguchi Ango and *Stories of Osaka life* by Oda Sakunosuke.

In *The Idiot*, readers follow the story of a protagonist trapped in a sordid, chaotic household alongside an intellectually disabled woman. The "idiot" with whom he enters into a base and purely carnal relationship amidst the physical ruins

of bombed out Tokyo. Similar to Dazai's Yozo, the protagonist of the *The Idiot*, Izawa, performs the normality to mask the cracked landscape underneath the façade. He makes propaganda movies, praising the imperial regime in the final days of war, well aware of the extent of destruction being caused by the war. Both these protagonists flee the societal performativity only while being in the arms of women, they label as "idiots".

These marginalised women, who exist beyond the margins of the polite and productive society, are the only sanctuary for these protagonists. While the SCAP was adamant on rendering a peaceful, hygienic and orderly image of occupied, democratized Japan. The texts like *No Longer Human* and *The Idiot* make slips through the crack of the façade through their protagonist, who lives a life of addiction, promiscuity, and relationships with social outcasts.

In that sense, the wiping out of imperial history and wartime memory by CCD can be seen represented in the physical landscape of Tokyo, which is violently wiped clean by imperial firebombs in *The Idiot* and Yozo's unrecognizable, featureless face in *No Longer Human*, when he institutionalised in the end of the novel.

CAP censorship blacked out wartime memory from textbooks to create a compliant, amnesiac populace. Dazai and Ango subvert this by showing that wiping history clean is a form of madness and destruction. Yozo's featureless face is not a peaceful clean slate, it is horrific, a lobotomized void.

The protagonists of these two texts can be seen as an allegory for the state of writers in heavily censored and performative phase of post-war Japan. Yozo's agonizing "clown mask" and Izawa's propaganda direction serves as direct symbol for the post-war writer under the shadow of censorship.

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