

THE REPRESENTATION OF LEPROSY AND WAR IN *THE SAMURAI'S GARDEN*

Claire Manes

In 1937, Japan invaded China. In that same year Sachi, a resident of the fictional leper village of Yamaguchi, Japan, returned to her hometown of Tarumi for the first time in forty years and told her story to Stephen Chan an outsider from China. The two seemingly unrelated events, one historical and one fictional, are skillfully woven together in Gail Tsukiyama's book *The Samurai's Garden* written and published some forty years after the episodes at a time when Japan was making some reparation for its actions in the Sino-Japanese war and for the unnecessary incarceration of leprosy patients in Japan.

The novel written by Gail Tsukiyama, herself an American of Chinese Japanese ancestry, relates the coming of age of young Stephen Chan, a Chinese youth who is in Japan recuperating from tuberculosis. The story, according to correspondence with the author, "explores themes of illness, courage, beauty and isolation against the reality of war" (email March 31, 2001). Lonely in his new surroundings, Stephen admits to "thinking [of] my time in Tarumi [like] a quiet resembling death" (Tsukiyama, 4). That loneliness and emptiness open him to the invitation offered by Matsu, the caretaker of Stephen's ancestral beach home, to "visit a friend who lives in a small mountain village near here" (23). Matsu explains that "Yamaguchi was a small village in the mountains also called the Village of Lepers" (23). Once in Yamaguchi, Stephen initially recalls stories of China "where lepers had always been feared and shunned [...] forced to live on the streets, left to beg or eat rats, while they simply rotted away" (24). He soon becomes curious rather than fearful, however, and is rapidly captivated by Matsu's friend Sachi whose face on the left side not only showed the ravages of the disease but also revealed a right side which was "the single most beautiful face I'd ever seen" (27). Stephen's enchantment with the woman "who had instilled a sense of richness and mystery in Tarumi" (31) leads him during his time in Tarumi to discover the woman behind the veil.

In his ensuing pilgrimages to Yamaguchi and in Sachi's brave returns to Tarumi, Stephen discovers not the disabled resident of a leper village, but a woman with a story. This story recorded by Stephen, himself an outsider, subverts the notion of leprosy as a stigmatizing condition which leaves its supposedly unclean sufferers as outcasts. Tsukiyama through Stephen's journal does not shirk from harsh descriptions of the disease, but she manages to reveal a woman who though physically scarred by her condition and lost to her family and fiancé has made a life for herself and her soul mate husband Matsu, a resident of Tarumi and a man free of leprosy and leprophobia. The author depicts a woman who "let[s] go of the past [by] facing it again" (130) and ultimately appears in Tarumi "in the bright light of day" (207). Not only does Tsukiyama subvert the prejudice against leprosy in her story of Sachi, she further undermines it by paralleling Sachi's story with the gradual revelation/deception about the Sino-Japanese war which figures in her novel as a discordant chord. Tsukiyama in her book develops both horrors, leprosy and war, as she presents the story of Sachi spiraling into light and the story of war barreling into darkness. This paper proposes to analyze the treatment of both tropes as they develop in the novel *The Samurai's Garden* and to suggest that despite centuries of prejudice against leprosy the book valorizes the woman Sachi and decries the war as the new leprosy.

The analogy works. Leprosy and war share some common elements: secrecy; small eruptions that ravage bodies, families, villages, and countries leaving people disabled, isolated, and alienated. However, there are differences as well. Leprosy in its effects on others is neither more nor less than a slightly contagious disease. It preys mysteriously on a small minority of people whose genetic makeup lacks immunity to the condition. Contrary to prejudice and erroneous notions about the disease, it is not caused by sin or dissolute living; sufferers of the disease do not choose or cause their condition. In Sachi's words, it is the disease that does the choosing (129). War, however, represents a more complex contagion that is on some level chosen. Ironically, leprosy for much of human history has been the more feared condition. "Leper" is a term of opprobrium; "warrior" is a designation of valor. Tsukiyama by setting the story of Sachi at the brink of the Sino-Japanese war juxtaposes these two eruptions, subverts long held attitudes toward leprosy, and offers readers the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about the condition.

Tsukiyama uses as her narrator Stephen Chan, an outsider himself who experienced alienation in China both because of his good looks (34) and his tuberculosis which engenders isolation and looks of shock at his appearance (25). In Japan as the war with his country

progresses, he also experiences the position of the reviled outsider, a position familiar to those with leprosy. Stephen's journal recorded from September 15, 1937, through October 29, 1938, gives him the "opportunity to find [his] own way" (3), but the time also enables him to record Sachi's story which she tells for the first time in more than forty years. It is that story and Stephen's fascination with it that subvert the prejudices about leprosy that folklorist Alan Dundes would characterize as "folk ideas [...] the unstated premises/which underlie the thoughts and actions of a given group of people" (Dundes, *Folk Ideas* 95-96).

Folk ideas about leprosy include fears about its contagion, notions about victims losing limbs, and tasteless jokes about the dissolution of the victims' bodies. Such unsubstantiated and erroneous ideas about the condition have led to the isolation and stigmatization of Hansen's disease patients and have made the term "leper" representative of a reviled outsider. However, the Yamaguchi residents that Stephen meets and their community that he writes about reflect a far different image and represent more closely Dundes's notion of a folk as, "*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common/factor[...and who] have some traditions which it calls its own" (Who, 6-7, author's italics). Marcia Gaudet in her writing about Hansen's disease residents in Carville, Louisiana, shows them to be a "true folk community [...] isolated from the rest of the world with their own traditions, celebrations, stories, and views of the outside world" (192-193). Gail Tsukiyama's novel depicts a similar community, a village created in the late 1800s, "[w]hen some of those who had the disease [and] were no longer wanted by others in town, [...] took what few belongings they had and went up into the mountains, hoping to die peacefully. Away from the cruelty of the healthy" (23).

As Tsukiyama's story progresses it reveals the village of Yamaguchi as a community with its own old timers, narrative traditions, and festal celebrations. Although Yamaguchi is a fictional village, such communities did exist in Japan in the early 1930s. Susan L. Burns in her essay "From Leper Village to Leprosarium: Public Health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan" describes one such village, Yu no Zawa, which began in the late 19th century near, but isolated from, the hot springs town of Kusatsu. In 1902, "Yu no Zawa had a population of 126 people, which included thirty-two married couples. Five children had been born there in the preceding year. The residents worked at a variety of professions" (112). This village could be Carville, Louisiana or Tsukiyama's Yamaguchi, Japan where "[M]en were gathered in small groups sipping tea and talking while others worked in small gardens, and women sat mending clothes"

(24). All three villages exhibited characteristics similar to any other small village, but all are different in that their residents were forced there because of leprosy that left them stigmatized in their home communities.

This condition, leprosy, happened gradually appearing first as a “rash...no larger than a yen coin” (134), a “rash...that wouldn’t go away” (78), but eventually spread. So insignificant was its initial appearance that the early victims of the disease “thought it was nothing” (78). It was a condition that had “been incubating for years before it showed its face” (136). Once it became visible, however, the unaffected “wanted the affected ones sent away from them” (136). Many chose suicide “to end [their] misery and restore honor to [their] families” (137); others fled to the village of Yamaguchi. Although the condition was slow moving and subtle, it was virulent in the physical and emotional devastation that it caused its victims.

War, too, in Tsukiyama’s novel has small beginnings before it erupts into the conflict and violence that lasted through the end of World War II. As Stephen first describes it, it seems small and relatively innocuous. His initial account simply notes “the news came over the radio that the Japanese had captured Tientsin and surrounded Peking” (4). The journal entry seems as insubstantial as the small rash that first appeared on Sachi’s arm or the rumors of Yamaguchi village seen as “a place for our kind in the mountains” (136). Both Hansen’s disease and the Sino-Japanese war in *The Samurai’s Garden* begin with minor eruptions and stories told through rumors and third parties. Neither condition initially presages the horrors that ensue, but both rapidly develop into full-scale devastation as the seemingly innocent rash of leprosy “won’t go away” (134) and the Japanese begin “swarming all over China” (14).

The rash on Sachi’s arm grows and spreads to her face finally leaving her severely scarred and veiled. The rash that is war also grows from seemingly innocuous reports on the radio to descriptions that scream for attention. It “escalates” (83) and becomes “insane” (84). The Japanese war efforts are “fierce” and leave the “carnage of death and destruction” (85). Implicit in the term carnage is the sense of physical destruction, a casualty of both leprosy and war. Tsukiyama’s description of Yamaguchi residents with “stumps of [...] arms” (121) and “heads and hands bandaged” (24) parallels the devastation of war. There are “Chinese losses, whose numbers were so large, so unreal, that it would take the shrill voiced woman on the radio days to count them all” (194). The numbers of war dead far surpass the victims of leprosy in Yamaguchi, but both images

testify to the physical destruction of the nameless victims created by both contagions.

The contagion of leprosy and war is rapid, physically debilitating, and noisy. Sachi recalls that at her diagnosis “a terrible scream [...] filled my head, drowning all the rest of [the doctor’s] words” (135) and again a “scream [...] brought the entire village to the door of the shack” (141) when she first saw Michiko, a woman badly defaced by leprosy. The war, too, is announced with raucous, grating noise that fills the airwaves in Matsu’s home and assaults Stephen’s ears. The news of war “blared” (17) on the radio; was announced in a “high, scratchy voice” (30); and “interrupted” the “music from Matsu’s radio” (59).

Noisy eruptions in the case of both leprosy and war leave the victims not only disfigured but displaced and homeless. The war leaves its victims as refugees with “gaunt, desolate faces begging for money and understanding” (4) and “starving in the streets” (118). They appear like those people suffering from leprosy who “were forced to live on the streets” (24) as outcasts, victims of the insidious eruptions they did not control. Likewise both groups are forced to seek makeshift shelters of their own devising. Those with leprosy in Tsukiyama’s novel find a place in the village of Yamaguchi where they built homes “painstakingly pieced together with mismatched scraps of wood” (24). The Chinese refugees also “built their makeshift homes in the crowded streets of Hong Kong” (4). They are “make-shift houses made of whatever they can find, like wood scraps or cardboard” (118).

Not only are victims of both leprosy and war isolated by injury and dislocation, they are victims of a public secret as defined by Michael Taussig in his book *Defacement: Public Secret and the Labor of the Negative*. Their stories are public secrets “which [are] generally known but cannot be articulated” (5, author’s italics). Historically, the full truth about both Hansen’s disease patients in Japan in the 1930s and the Japanese atrocities in the Sino-Japanese war is only now gradually being revealed. Fictionally in *The Samurai’s Garden* in 1937-1938 both are secrets. Sachi’s family assumes she has died; she and Matsu hide their relationship from Kenzo, her fiancé who disowned her after her diagnosis; and the village of Tarumi does not reveal the leprosy in its midst. Matsu explains, “It was kept quiet among the local villagers. After all, Tarumi was a place for outsiders to come on holiday. If they’d heard about the disease, no one would return. We didn’t want to frighten anyone away” (29). Likewise the brutality of the war was kept secret. Iris Chang’s book *The Rape of Nanking*:

the Forgotten Holocaust records the “deliberate attempt [even until today] by certain Japanese to distort history” (13). Tsukiyama’s novel also testifies to the secrecy surrounding the Nanking invasion. Although Stephen learns about much of the war through raucous radio commentary that interrupts Matsu’s classical music, “there had been nothing on Matsu’s radio about the massacre” (97). It is a secret that Stephen learns a month later in a letter from his college friend King who writes, “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Nanking massacre [...] thousands of innocent Chinese men, women, and children have been killed and raped needlessly by the Japanese bastards” (97).

Secrecy and dissimulation also figure into the way some Hansen’s disease patients negotiate their stories. They recognize that those with war injuries are often valorized or viewed with sympathy, while leprosy patients may find themselves feared, reviled, or curiously objectified. They, too, are tainted by the notion that war images are perhaps a more acceptable presentation of their condition. Marcia Gaudet in her article, “Telling It Slant: Personal Narrative, Tall Tales, and the Reality of Leprosy,” recounts the experiences of those with Hansen’s disease who cover or explain their injuries with “responses [such as] ‘I was in an accident,’ or ‘I was burned’ or ‘War injury’” (197). One man’s story which “may be on its way to becoming a local legend in the extended Carville community” (197) illustrates one approach to explaining the injuries from Hansen’s disease. It is an approach that seems particularly relevant to this study.

As Gaudet relates it, Billy, whose hands were badly deformed from untreated Hansen’s disease, responds to those who question him with two stories, one the truth, the other a lie. He offers his listeners the option of choosing for themselves the real story. In relating his tale he notes that he clearly states at the beginning that the first story is a lie and the second is the truth. After he spins his lie regaling his listeners with his heroics in the Korean War, he tells them again, “Now that’s the lie. The true story is I got leprosy” (200). Invariably the listeners choose to or appear to believe the lie. Leprosy as an explanation for a disfigured body is perhaps too remote or too uncomfortable a reality to contemplate. War injuries seem to be more understandable and acceptable (199-203).

Tsukiyama uses a rather different tact in representing the carnage of leprosy and war. She graphically describes the injuries from leprosy without hiding their cause. She is clear sighted and unflinching in describing the devastation of untreated leprosy, but she also ameliorates her images. Sachi’s face is seen in its devastation, but according to Stephen, its “unblemished right side [is] the single most

beautiful face I'd ever seen" (27). By contrast the injuries from war in *The Samurai's Garden* are not personalized and they clearly depict carnage. Letters from home and accounts on the radio recount "Chinese...being slaughtered" (182) and "thousands of innocent Chinese men, women and children ...killed and raped needlessly" (97). The injuries from war and leprosy coalesce in Stephen's "saki-induced sleep that had me dreaming of Yamaguchi. Only instead of being in Japan, the village was in the midst of a bustling Hong Kong, the cars and crowds going about their daily business. And in the center of it all, I could see Pie passing out warm clothes and wrapping white bandages around Sachi and Hiro's eaten away limbs" (159).

War and leprosy are carefully paralleled in Tsukiyama's novel. Both start small, escalate, grow in secret, and leave victims and carnage, but as Tsukiyama presents the two conditions there are clear distinctions. The direction she takes in the development of her story clearly valorizes Sachi and leaves one reading war as the new leprosy with Stephen as its latest named victim.¹

Sachi, from the first, is seen not as a victim of leprosy but as a woman scarred by a disfiguring disease. She is a gentle, soft spoken woman, a gracious hostess and a good friend, sensitive to the discomfort and needs of others. She is the one who for Stephen "instilled a sense of richness and mystery in Tarumi" (31). She takes charge of her life, caring for her garden, serving Matsu and Stephen during their visits to her, and courageously returning to Tarumi forty years after she was exiled because of her condition. She tells her own story at Stephen's behest, but she tells it in her own way and in her own time. While she clearly acknowledges the pain that her condition has caused her, she is not identified by the disease. She has the "ulcers" and "white scaly scabs" (27) of untreated leprosy, but these are accidents of her appearance, not the essence of her person. As Stephen sees her, she is a woman of beauty and grace who captivates him and whose "damaged side of her face seemed to glow in the sunlight" (204). As Stephen portrays her, Sachi is more rhapsodized than reviled. Her numinosity seems to link her to the "*kami* [or life force of...] the sun known as the goddess Amaterasu" (French 200) and to a Buddhist legend related by Burns. In the "eighth-century

¹ Stephen is a victim of the leprosy of war; logically one could consider him a leper. However, the term leper is painful and odious to patients living with Hansen's disease and I am reluctant to make that seemingly logical step for fear of creating a new prejudice and contributing once more to needless pain. The parallel between the spread of leprosy and war seems clear in the book, but I do not believe that it is necessary needlessly to stigmatize war victims with a painful and prejudicial term.

empress Kimyo [...] offered to bathe personally one thousand people. [When confronted with the one thousandth person] a leper [...]he empress hesitated for a moment, but then proceeded to wash him with care. When she was finished the afflicted one emanated a bright light and revealed himself to be a *bodhistva* [a representation of the Buddha]" (Burns 106).

Sachi, a woman of beauty and grace has as her soul mate the warrior Matsu, her "savior" (139) and the "true *kami* of Yamaguchi" (125). As Stephen sees him he is a man who has "a strong face [...]like a samurai" (30). Tsukiyama describes this gentle man as one who is out of the fray of the Sino-Japanese war, but who possesses not only the face but the duty, devotion and steadfast loyalty of a samurai as aptly described in Thomas Cleary's text, *Code of the Samurai: A Modern Translation of the Bushido Shoshinshu of Taira Shigesuke*.² Like "the bridge [that] represented the samurai's difficult path from this world to the afterlife" (Tsukiyama 59), Matsu mediates leprosy to Sachi and the war to Stephen. He has lived with the reality of leprosy at least as long as Sachi but possesses no fear or revulsion of it. When the rash chose Sachi, Matsu promised to "take care of everything" (135), a promise he kept throughout Sachi's forty years in Yamaguchi. He knew before Sachi did about the existence of Yamaguchi, and from leprosy's initial appearance in Tarumi he accepted a young doctor's enlightened reassurance "that the disease couldn't be spread by simple touch" (29).

Matsu interprets the war to Stephen in the same patient, diligent way telling him early in the conflict that "Japan is like a young woman who thinks too much of herself. She is bound to get herself into trouble" (17). Although he cannot stop the spread of the war any more than he could control the spread of leprosy, Matsu does remain sensitive to Stephen's position as a young Chinese man in Japan learning about the invasion of his country through reports on a Japanese radio. When the "high scratchy voice coming from his radio had just declared another Japanese advancement in their struggle against Shanghai Matsu leaned over and played with the dial until a Bach concerto filled the room" (30). His is the wisdom and strength that carry both Sachi and Stephen. He plants a garden for Sachi when she is still "filled with anger and rage" (152). It is this garden that enables her "to relish the fact that its beauty was one that

² I found both Thomas Cleary's *The Code of the Samurai: A Modern Translation of the Bushido Shoshinshu of Taira Shigesuke* and Shannon French's *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present* helpful for their analysis of the Samurai warrior tradition in Japan.

no disease or person could ever take away from me [...] I was no longer myself at all, but part of the garden” (152). Stephen too learns important lessons from Matsu who “moved slowly, meticulously to cut back the branch in just the right place.”

“Isn’t it interesting, Stephen-san,’ he said ‘how sometimes you must cut away something in order to make it grow back stronger? ...

‘It may seem lonely and barren at first, only to flower again in the spring’” (193).

The terse, stoical, reticent warrior Matsu continues in what may be his longest conversation in the book. Shaking his head at “the stupidity” of war, he continues “[W]e aren’t so different, humans [...] and plants. We are all a part of one nature and from each other we learn how to live....

‘I won’t say we humans don’t still have much to learn. Sometimes we love and hate without thought. ...But in the end, Stephen-san, you can only look back, hoping everything that happens in your life is for a purpose’” (193).

Although Matsu remains philosophical about both leprosy and war, Tsukiyama’s portrayal of the war represents it as an essentially virulent condition. By the novel’s end Sachi’s position as a reviled and condemned outsider has been subverted as she and Matsu have been linked with the Japanese belief in *kami* and with numinous revelations. Now a new villain, the “Japanese devils” (118), has appeared, and war’s virulent contagion has created a new victim. Stephen’s face now bears the mark of an outsider. The novel moves toward the light for Sachi who by story’s end has come again to visit in Tarumi, “daring all in the bright light of day” (207) and for Matsu who would “maybe eventually move to Yamaguchi” (209). Leprosy remains a reality for Sachi, but it is not her defining characteristic. Her face reveals her suffering, but it is also testimony to her courage and endurance. The stigma of leprosy has been subverted in Tsukiyama’s portrayal of Sachi not as its victim but as a courageous woman who happens to have a debilitating condition.

The face of Stephen, however, has been marked because of the war which barrels rapidly toward new destruction. This Chinese youth who had earlier attested to a charmed life and a face that was “too good looking” (34) is now “trapped behind the bamboo fence” (18). War has begun to separate him from loved ones as surely as leprosy ever did. Initially he experiences “stares...not only because I was a Chinese face in their village, but...also [because] there were very

few young men in Tarumi” (44). Earlier in China, he had experienced only the subtleties of the encroaching war as “small group of soldiers loitering in public places, rifles slung on their shoulders...appeared harmless” (5). By story’s end, however, Stephen has become a victim of the leprosy of war. More and more he realizes he is the hated outsider and despite the refuge of Tarumi, he recognizes “it would just be a matter of time” (163) before he would have to leave. The “glare [that] cut right through [with...] a look so full of hate” (110), indicated to him that he was “amidst some kind of enemy here in Tarumi” (111). It was an enemy that no longer appeared “harmless” (5) but “menacing” (199). Tarumi has once again ceased to be a place of refuge for those with marked faces. It forces Stephen out just as surely as it forced Sachi out forty years earlier. No longer can he “be like everyone else” (196). Ironically now, however, he is very much like his beloved Sachi, for he too now bears a mark that is reviled and his awareness of his condition causes “an unexpected blow to my stomach” (202) every bit as visceral as Sachi’s “scream” (135) when she first learned of her diagnosis. Stephen has become the new victim, an outcast and refugee, a Chinese enemy in the midst of the Japanese people in their own homeland and he now experiences “what it meant to be a ... disgraced one” (25).

Claire Manes
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
United States of America

Works Cited

- Burns, Susan L. “From ‘Leper Villages’ to Leprosaria: Public Health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan.” *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*. Ed. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Cleary, Thomas. *Code of the Samurai: A Modern Translation of the Bushido Shoshinshu of Taira Shigesuke*. Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1999.
- Dundes, Alan. “Folk Ideas as Units of World View.” *Journal of American Folklore*. 84 (1971): 93-103.

- _____. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.
- French, Shannon E. *Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
- Gaudet, Marcia. "Telling it Slant: Personal Narrative, Tall Tales and the Reality of Leprosy." *Western Folklore* 49 (1990): 191-207.
- Taussig, Michael. *Defacement: Public Secret and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Tsukiyama, Gail. *The Samurai's Garden*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- _____. email correspondence with Gail Tsukiyama, March 31, 2004.