

# BEFRIENDING THE RUSSIANS – A ‘NOVEL’ COSMOPOLITAN EXPERIENCE IN TANIZAKI JUNICHIRO’S “THE MAKIOKA SISTERS”



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**Abstract:** Being a geographical neighbour, Japan's relation with Russia has had a fair share of ups and downs. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century “freebooters” operated illegally at people-to-people level in contravention of Japanese laws of National seclusion in the northern regions of present-day Hokkaido Island. Russia had played a key role in breaking the National seclusion policy of Japan. Russians, because of their physical build, appeared to be barbarian-like to the petite Japanese and were referred to as Aka Ezo<sup>1</sup> (Red Ezo). After the Meiji Restoration, the Russian-Japanese treaty opened Shimoda, Hakodate and Nagasaki to Russian ships for repairs and provisioning. Relations further transitioned with the Russo Japanese war in 1904 and the Russian Revolution when there was an exodus of White Russians. This study looks at the perception and relations with Russians who migrated to Japan through the literary lens. Tanizaki Junichiro, an author of great repute, in his work, “The Makioka Sisters” portrays a Russian family in Kobe. A close study of the characters as observed by the Japanese protagonists will help shed light on Russia and Russians beyond newspaper facts. Through this interaction with the Russian family, one can observe a change in the perception of Russians amongst the Japanese compared to earlier times.

**Keywords:** White Russians, Perceptions, Russo-Japanese relations, Second World War backdrop, Lessons for Japan

In recent years, Japan's ties with Russia have become tense in the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with economic sanctions imposed against Russia. Japan has had the Northern Territories dispute with Russia for almost eighty years over four islands in Hokkaido and has yet to sign the official peace treaty. For a decade Japan had attempted to resolve the differences and had avoided criticism of Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, but the present relations have

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1 Hokkaido was known as Ezo till 1869.

hit a new low with visa bans and asset freezes and zero prospect of Japan achieving a favourable settlement. So, though geographically close, separated by the Sea of Japan, the two nations are distant politically. However, the two countries were not always at odds. To set the backdrop, the historical ties between Japan and Russia during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries need mention.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, relations were fairly positive, till conflicts of interest and competition for pre-eminence in northeast Asia arose. Catherine the Great<sup>2</sup> had encouraged trade between the two countries and Russian merchants had come in contact with Japan, and the Tsarist government had restrained expansion in the Far East.

Russian attempts to remain on friendly terms with Japan persisted until 1895, despite an assassination attempt of Crown Prince Nicholas during his Japan trip by an escorting Japanese policeman in 1891. The Japanese had feared that the incident would be used a pretext for war and had done everything possible to make amends for the lack of hospitality towards a state guest. Modernization of Japan fuelled Japan's continental expansion dreams to Korea and Manchuria and eventually clashed with Russian interests. Even in October of 1903, Nicholas II had sent a message to his Far Eastern Representative mentioning "I do not want war between Russia and Japan and will not allow it." Japan did not wish negotiations and waged the Russo-Japanese war to win and transform itself into a Great Asian Power, having defeated a European nation. The Russian Empire was shaken and facilitated revolutionary uprisings and the end of the Romanov dynasty. Lenin had contrasted the 'despotic and backward government' of Russia and the 'politically free and culturally rapidly progressing people' of Japan. After coming to power in 1917, the Bolsheviks refused to honour old agreements. Dmitri Ivanovich Abrikossow was the last representative of Tsarist Russia in Japan till the Soviet Union took over the Embassy. There were about 2 million Russian refugees who did not accept the Bolshevik rule and migrated to United States, Europe and China. Some of them also came to Japan, mostly residing in Tokyo and Yokohama. They were of various ethnic and religious backgrounds and were categorized as 'stateless' in Japan. These refugees were known as *Hakkei Roshiajin* (White Russians) with Abrikossow as the unofficial spokesperson for this community. Abrikossow stayed on in Japan and recorded his observations in "Revelations of a Russian Diplomat: The Memoirs of Dmitri I. Abrikossow". By 1923, reportedly 2000 White Russians lived among the 8000 foreign residents of Yokohama. When Vladivostok too was seized by the Red Army in 1926, emigration to Japan was but obvious. Many Russian celebrities such as ballet dancer Anna Pavlova too sought refuge. They often brought with them mementos of imperial Russia. Kobe became the central settlement after the Great Kanto Earthquake with 400 White Russians shifting base. The White Russian community was treated with suspicion initially. In the 1930s the White Russians even donated to the Japanese government generously to show their allegiance. After the World War, there was a rapid decline in their numbers. Perception of Russia in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thus was very complicated, it was seen sometimes as an ally and sometimes as a potential enemy.

Analysis of literary works throws light on such native perceptions. Many famous authors like Kikuchi Kan, Natsume Soseki, Nagai Kafu had made references to Russia in their works. This

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2 Catherine II (1762-96)

article deals with the fictitious depiction of one White Russian family in the novel, "The Makioka Sisters", by a renowned Japanese author, Junichiro Tanizaki. Before an analysis of this particular work, the next section briefly outlines the author and his writings. It is to be noted that his works have been translated into Russian.

Junichiro Tanizaki is one of the most highly regarded authors whose career spanned over the modernization period of Japan and after the World War II. His stories present the challenges of a rapidly changing society trying to imitate the West, breaking traditional Confucian values. This juxtaposition of the West and Japanese tradition forms the background of many of his stories, narrated in the search of a cultural identity. Tanizaki himself had migrated to the Kansai (Western Japan) region after the 1923 Earthquake and anchored his writings in the cultural traditions of Japan. He observed that the Kansai region with two erstwhile ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto and the important trading centre of Osaka had managed to preserve the traditional ethos as against the blind modernization seen in Tokyo. Tanizaki was well versed in Classics and translated the 10<sup>th</sup> century novel, "*Genji Monogatari*" (The Tale of Genji) by Murasaki Shikibu. The work, "*Sasameyuki*" (The Makioka Sisters), which will be analysed for this study, is in a way inspired by this Heian period classic that he had translated. Prince Genji in the Tale of Genji, says,

"...this art of novel ... Does not simply consist in the author's telling of a story about the adventures of some other person. On the contrary, it happens because the story teller's own experience of men and things, whether for good or ill – not only what he has passed through himself, but events which he has only witnessed or been told of – has moved him to an emotion so passionate that he can no longer keep it shut up in his heart. Again, and again something in his own life".

Exoticism, eroticism and the obsession with female form are also recurring motifs in his work. He was nominated many times for the Nobel Prize in literature as well, though he did not win it. Amongst his literary works, *The Makioka Sisters* was heralded as the best in Western critiques.

*The Makioka sisters* portrays life in Japan from 1936 to April 1941, depicting their day to day anxieties, fears, routines and joys. Though the nation was at war, the novel, except for a rare mention of raids on Swatow and Chaochow etc. in China, totally ignores explicit mention of war. It is this indifference to the war effort that led to the censorship of the novel. The novel is about sisters of a wealthy Osaka merchant family in its decline, where the central plot revolves around finding a suitable match for the third sister, Yukiko who is shy and reticent. The youngest sister, Taeko, in contrast is very modern in her ways, but has to wait to get married till the elder sister is married off. The oldest sister, Tsuruko, who was head of the Main House, shifts from Osaka to Tokyo along with her husband and children and her sense of displacement is acute, while the second sister, Sachiko is in the Branch House in Kobe. Sachiko has a closer bond with the younger siblings, Yukiko and Taeko. Sachiko too felt indefinable sorrow at losing the Osaka house, her roots. This love for the ancestral house and sadness at being uprooted due to circumstances has a parallel to the White Russians who had to flee their country.

This novel of Tanizaki is not the only one that finds mention of White Russians. His earlier novel, "*Chijin no Ai*" (A Fool's Love, 1924), also had questioned contemporary modernity and

the complex relationship with the West. The novel is a personal record of the protagonist, Joji who narrates his relationship and marriage to Naomi. The novel has a reference to a Russian countess who taught Western style dance. Tanizaki's critics believe that this characterization was modelled after Pavlova, the ballerina from St. Petersburg. The dance teacher represents sensuality with her radiant white skin, glowing golden hair, sparkling blue eyes and blazing red lips. A few decades back, even as late as 1895, the standards of female beauty of the Orient upheld that the lustrous pitch-black hair of Japanese women was better than the hair of European women which looked like dried up corn. The whiteness of the complexion was a major object of the author's fetish. So, in the novel, "*Chijin no Ai*" (tr. Naomi), to Joji, the hands of the Countess appeared so white that the pale blue veins seemed as a delicate pattern on marble. Naomi's hands he realised were completely different from those of Shlemskaya, they were simply dark...". The author also alludes to the exotic aroma of Countess Shlemskaya's perfume – "Ah, that scent – it evoked in me thoughts of lands across the sea, of exquisite, exotic flower gardens." There are pages devoted to her description alone. The dance teacher brandished a whip with sparse dialogues like "no", "no good" to teach the students effectively dance to the beats of music and with such a powerful description, the Western supremacy is acknowledged. The teacher is good and passionate about her work and never took breaks during the dance lessons. The students were in awe of her vitality, passion for work and of course her looks.

During his stay in urban Yokohama from 1921 to 1923, author Tanizaki had initiated himself into the exotic arts of speaking English and dancing. Needless to say, most of his tutors were Russian women who were invariably of self-styled aristocratic descent trying to make a living. Tanizaki observes first-hand the destitution in which the Russian immigrants live. In "*Hitofusa no kami*" (A Tuft of hair, 1926) he describes the poverty conditions. In western exoticist literature, such as "*Madame Chrysantheme*" (1887), if the Japanese mistress was the exotic, in Japan, the "available" Russian women facilitated the exotic gratification to the "yellow skinned" Japanese men. The Japanese were overwhelmed by the white complexion of the Russians.

What sets apart the White Russian family in "*The Makioka sisters*" from the stereotypical sexual depictions even in earlier Tanizaki's works, is the subplot it occupies in the novel. The Kyrilenko family are just friendly neighbours in the cosmopolitan Kobe scenario, along with the German Stolz family. While, the Makiokas struggle to find a suitable prospect for the third sister, Katharina Kyrilenko moves to England and accomplishes her goal of finding a rich husband.

The first mention of Katharina in the book is at a Cantonese restaurant where she meets Taeko and her sisters and greets them in Japanese which is far from perfect, but comprehensible. To Yukiko, Katharina didn't look like a Russian, so that is the first deviation from the stereotypical White Russian portrayal. Katharina is young, slim and pretty but has a head on her shoulder. Katharina's family was broken up at the time of the Russian Revolution, and she grew up in Shanghai with her grandmother, while her mother and brother had made their way to Japan. This explains Katharina's love for Chinese food and deep knowledge of which restaurant maybe serving best Chinese fare. In Shanghai, Katharina worked at an English hospital as a nurse and had married an Englishman with whom she had a daughter. After Katharina's divorce the daughter was taken back by the father to England. Such a turn of events too doesn't leave her bitter and she shows a cosmopolitan modern outlook to life.

In the novel setting, Katharina was living with her mother and brother in a small two-storey house near Taeko's studio and was learning Japanese doll making from Taeko. Katharina was approximately similar in age to Taeko but still addressed Taeko as teacher. She learnt the skill of doll making quickly, just like she had managed to master Japanese language in a few months and became a trusted apprentice to Taeko. Taeko possibly appreciated the freedom her new found friend had to pursue her dreams, so she supported her wholeheartedly. Supporting a needy Russian girl also gave Taeko a sense of empowerment which was symbolic of Japanese supremacy. Katharina, like many other Russian refugees, it is to be observed, was not shy to ask for help and grab the opportunity life presented her. As a mother, it was her wish to be reunited with her daughter in England, of whom she had only one photograph as a memory. She doesn't hide her past and embraces it openly but in a detached, philosophical way. Katharina teaches the Makioka sisters that in life vital balance can be maintained only by vigorous actions against all the impersonal chances in the world. At the end of the novel, Katharina ventures into the unknown, gets married to a young business executive and is reunited with her daughter.

The Kyrilenko brother had a business of importing wool and had been in Japan for long. His Japanese was very good. The Mother, past sixty, was set in old ways and had never bothered to learn Japanese well and was not comprehensible at times. Taeko mimics the old lady's Japanese: "I no good Japanese. French, German, I speak" with all the polite registers and accent to amuse her sisters at home. The old lady was a doctor of law, so quite educated and undefeated even in an alien country with unfavourable circumstances. She talked at length of her opinions and the nostalgic past in broken Japanese, as reported by Taeko. This piqued the curiosity of the Makioka family to meet her in person someday.

After Katharina befriends Taeko, Taeko had dinner at Katharina's many a times and found the Russians to be hearty eaters and drinkers. Taeko was full with appetizers alone, but the hosts ate bread and vegetable and meat dishes alongside their beer, *sake* and *vodka*. Taeko didn't find the Russian food too remarkable except for a sort of ravioli soup. Taeko also goes skating with Katharina and her mother and is astonished at the mother's athletic prowess. The Mother, like Countess Shlemskaya, is very energetic and manages to draw many onlookers at the skating rink. The old lady's zest for life is highlighted. Katharina also visited the Makioka residence to work on a doll and got acquainted with all. Teinosuke found her no less than a Hollywood star in looks but gentle and friendly to get along with the Japanese women. The Kyrilenko brother too visited with Katharina once and chatted with Teinosuke over cocktails.

Katharina, wishing to socialise with her Japanese friends, extends a dinner invitation to the Makiokas to which Taeko, Sachiko and her husband, Teinosuke respond. The Kyrilenko house was small, yet clean and pretty. The Makiokas see framed portraits of the Tsar and his consort as well as the Japanese Emperor and Empress in the house as a mark of allegiance to the past and present coordinates. The dining experience was an interesting cross-cultural experience, with dinner time much delayed, that the Makiokas couldn't help feel that they got the date wrong. Also, though invited, they couldn't understand why the mother and brother were not there. They kept up small talk and kept petting Kyrilenko's dog, Boris. At eight o'clock, Katharina started setting the table and the Makiokas couldn't help wonder when the appetizers and dishes were prepared. There was bread, smoked salmon, sardines in oil, ham, cheese and crackers, a meat pie. The Mother and the brother along with another Russian friend returned and joined the

dinner. The Mother had brought oysters, caviar and sour pickles. For drinks there was vodka, beer and *sake*. Katharina and her mother seemed fond of *sake*, though instead of the usual tiny cups for *sake* they drank out of glasses. When the Japanese guests could hardly eat so much, they passed on food to the dog under the table. There was not enough space for them to be seated and even cutlery did not seem to be sufficient. The Russians were a bit embarrassed at these points, but didn't shy away from hosting or being generous with food servings. The Japanese guests were well aware of the space constraints and the economic conditions of the displaced family, and thus they pretended to overlook the inadequacies.

The conversations at the dinner too are very interesting. The brother's name was Vronsky, at which Teinosuke makes a reference to the protagonist in "Anna Karenina", much to the surprise of the Russian. All educated Japanese back then were well versed with the works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Mr. Vronsky is portrayed as a Russian who was fond of children and though his unhappy love affair of long ago too finds a mention in the novel, his love for children is a positive affirmative trait. Mr. Vronsky was disappointed that Sachiko had not got her little girl along.

There are conversations which turn to global political events as also to White Russians including the Russian mother. The international circumstances had made them "stateless". For example, they continued to avoid referring to Leningrad, and talked of the Tsarskoe Selo palace near Petrograd. Their house in Russia was near the palace and they had seen the Tsar ride out on his horse every day. There were political statements such as, "All White Russians feel that Japan will fight longest against the Communists." When the question of China's fate came up, Teinosuke, though he had an avid interest in International affairs, hesitated to participate in the debate as he was suspicious of the Russians. Katharina and her mother have an altercation about England being an ally or an enemy.

Although the Makioka family members are acquainted with the German Stolz family and the Russian Kyrilenkos, there is a difference in attitude in their engagement with the two foreign families. The Makiokas proactively invite the Stolz family, the children play together and continue correspondence with letter updates even on their return to Germany. The Makiokas had intended to invite the Kyrilenkos back to repay for the party, but it never materialised, possibly reflecting the war situation. When the war is more imminent, Katharina sails for Germany with help of her friend, Rudolf who facilitated her to find her way to England. The mother doesn't shed a tear at the parting. The Kyrilenko brother and mother continue their stay in Japan. On finally reaching England, Katharina sends a picture of her new house and life in bunkers. News of Katharina reach The Makioka family not directly, but only through chance meetings and updates by the brother. Through this depiction, we see the portrayal of White Russians as still not trusted by the Japanese, and yet object of sympathy. From Russians being equated to demons with their red hair and foreign tongue, in the early encounters, the image of the Russians undergoes many transformations by the time of the World War. Earlier on, in the Tokugawa period, the Russians were perceived to have dark skin and red hair. With interaction, it gravitates towards a fetishist awe towards white skin. The term "White Russians" was a political term, and yet the common Japanese associate it with physicality.

In this people-to-people interaction, we observe that although war touches personal lives and is extremely chaotic, the core of human nature is built on curiosity, perceptions and observations.

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