

God is dead

Commentary on Tooi Koe by Setouchi Jakucho

Kurihara Yasushi

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Walk through reality while dreaming

LOVE Jakucho, let's go! Right now, we're at the height of the corona pandemic craze. Pan-pa-pan, it's a pandemic. I actually had plans to visit Jyaku-an and talk with Jakucho-san¹ this April, but of course something came up by chance and it got postponed. I wanna meet up, that's too bad. Oh, corona. But it's times like these that call for literature. I wanna stuff myself with love stories.

Humans are fearsome things; however relaxed a person is, whenever they turn the TV on and see people praising the government for handing out masks they get pissed off, saying "are you fuckin' kidding me?" Their eyes are wide open and they're already cracking. In a state of constantly being online. Saying things need to be like this or things need to be like that, they're made frantic calling for a better government. Human thought is fixed on being useful to society. Get rid of what isn't useful? People who don't restrain themselves are a virus? Crack down on causing trouble for others? That's how police think, you're looking with the gaze of a politician. The world is stiff as a board with domination and revolution.

But literature changes all that in a second. Drink it once, and you'll fly over those policing thoughts in a single bound. I guess you could say it feels like falling in love. Of course you read books because you enjoy it, but becoming obsessed with them and wolfing them down isn't something you plan out consciously, you wouldn't be able to. Of course it's not something you do because someone else tells you to either.

Even if what's written there is just impropriety from start to finish, even if it's not particularly useful to your life, that's got nothing to do with it. I can't quit, I'm not stopping. Asking whether it's useful or not, that kind of thing doesn't matter anymore. Driven by some kind of unworldly strength, as if you're dreaming, you've fallen for a book. It's something that happens naturally. Once someone's obtained that "spontaneous" power, I think that, in a true sense, they've escaped the politician's gaze. They want love. Walk through reality while dreaming.

This book is dangerous

That's what it is to me. The themes are love and revolution. It's a critical biography of the Meiji anarchist Kanno Sugako. It was serialized in the magazine *Shisou no Kagaku* starting in 1968, and published as a book in 1970. Temporally, it was a time when women's lib was about to give its first cries as it came into the world, even in Japan. Though fundamentally things haven't changed, it was an age when women speaking sexually was looked upon as taboo, and called licentious. Men were the subject of sex, and women were nothing more than an object to be spoken about. It was master and slave. They believed that, because women were men's property, they had to protect their virtue and act modest, and the ones that violated that were vulgar and filthy. "Good wife and wise mother" or "whore." She becomes a machine for giving birth to children or a tool for relieving sexual desires. Seriously? Is she a latrine?

Into all of this, Jakucho-san brought Kanno Sugako. While naming herself an essayist, she was uninhibited about sex, and was at times wife, poisonous woman, and disrespected female

¹ Buddhist nun (b. 1922) known for her sometimes racy literature. Has written about other historic Japanese anarchist women such as Ito Noe and Kaneko Fumiko. love Jakucho is a compilation of her well-known remarks in celebration of her 99th birthday.

combatant. Using her surging passion as a weapon, she was an anarchist who set her mind to blowing up the emperor, was found out by the authorities and crushed beneath their boots. What was spoken negatively about this woman and the witch-like image she was assigned, Jakuchō-san accepted exactly as it was, capturing it and re-framing it into something positive. This isn't something where she was evaluating her objectively. In some ways she might have overlapped with her. It's a monologue. Jakuchō-san becomes Sugako, sex, sex, and sexual stuff included, expressing clearly everything she'd done up to that point. It's like a punch to the gut.

While we're at it, let's put together a simple picture of the kind of person Sugako was. She was born in Osaka in 1881. Her family had the kind of wealth that came from her father being a businessman. Originally a spirited child, her mother's death when she was 12 threw her life into upheaval. She was bullied by the stepmother that replaced her. When she was 16, a miner forced his way into their house under the guidance of her stepmother, and she was raped. Her stepmother kept telling her it happened because she was immodest. How cruel. Why do I have all the bad luck? This became a trauma for her. She thought, "I'm filthy, I'm licentious." At 19, she married and moved to Tokyo. Tokyo, the capital of flowers. But her husband quickly grew to dislike her and threw her out of the house, and it was back to Osaka. How about writing a novel? With her brother's introduction, she apprenticed herself to Udagawa Bunkai. Bunkai was then a famous author, and more than 30 years her senior, but he was already taken with her. With a little tempting, they became lovers. It was an affair. In 1902, with Bunkai's support she became a reporter for the *Osaka Chouhou*. She was a journalist.

In the beginning, her interests lay in the movement for the abolition of prostitution. She was baptized into Christianity, and even entered the Christian Women's Organization that was leading that movement. But the brunt of the criticism at that time was aimed, not at the government that approved of the sexual enslavement of women, but at prostitutes. Using terms like "fallen women" and "disgraced women," the Women's Organization scolded them, saying, "Don't do that shameful business in public." Sugako was no exception. Why would she do something like that? This book paints it like this. Through the anti-prostitution movement, Sugako renounced the self that up to that point she'd been made to think of as vulgar. She then said oh, my lord, and got baptized, while at the same time engaging in an illicit love affair and indulging in sexual pleasure. That sense of corruption became an attack on those weaker than herself, and made her crave sexual pleasure all the more. I'm the worst. Speaking of which, if I keep this up, I'll make myself spiritually bankrupt. Oh my God.

In the midst of all this, she was attracted to socialism. Could even a no-good person like me be saved? Her sense of concern that had reached its limits within Christianity now turned towards socialism, which attacked the absurdity of society. She visited the *Heimin-sha*² in Tokyo, and met Toshihiko Sakai. When Sugako spoke of all of her seeming degeneracy, Sakai listened intently and said, you've made it through a lot, none of this is your fault. So that's how it is. I've done nothing wrong. Instead it's the society that made me think I'm vulgar and no-good that's wrong. I think it's from that sort of place that Sugako's socialism started.

In 1905, on Sakai's recommendation, Sugako became a reporter at *Muro Shinpou* in Tanabe in Wakayama prefecture. It was a newspaper friendly to socialism. She moved to Tanabe the year after. On the way there, a prostitute on the ship ran into a bad situation with the men. Now, Sug-

² Meiji-era socialist social center and center of the socialist movement in the early 1900s supported by the *Heimin Shinbun*, a socialist anti-war newspaper.

ako felt an intense sense of indignation. No longer was she thinking about “fallen women.” She felt angry at that very way of thinking. Humans treating humans like objects, dominating them as slaves. Men treated women as objects, dominating them as wives and prostitutes. In both capitalism and patriarchy, there were hierarchies between people, and this was perceived as obvious and natural. That produced a tendency to look down on weaker people. It had to be attacked. After she joined *Muro Shinpou*, Sugako once again involved herself in the anti-prostitution movement, but I think her viewpoint had already become one of a certain kind of women’s socialism.

Now, during her Tanabe period, she sent for her sister who was suffering from tuberculosis. However, she soon caught tuberculosis herself. This was bad. But this time she didn’t become depressed. That’s because Arakata Kanson was there. A little before Sugako came there, they’d dispatched Kanson, the young blood of the *Heimin-sha*. He was a man six years younger than Sugako. Reporting together, they became intimate. Their relationship at first was less romantic and more like an older sister and younger brother. He got on well with her younger sister too, and the three of them often had fun together. From what we see in the book, we’re given the sense that this time was for Sugako the most peaceful and happiest.

Kanson finally returned to Tokyo, and following that, in 1906, Sugako quit the *Muro Shinpou* and went to Tokyo as well. They got married and started living together. However, things between them soon cooled. Actually, you could say it was Sugako who cooled off. For what happens here, I think it’s much more fitting to read it in Jakucho-san’s writing rather than following historical fact, so please do. Now we’ve reached 1908. The Red Flag Incident breaks out. This is a famous historic incident, but truth is it was only Kanson and his good friend Osugi Sakae³ waving a red flag in the street. It brought about extreme repression, with all the socialists there being arrested on the spot. They were also given pointlessly heavy punishments. They were tossed into prison, with Kanson getting a year and a half and Osugi getting a whole two and a half years.

Sugako was also arrested and tried. Thankfully she was found innocent, but her examination was brutal, with them disrespecting her, calling her ugly and so forth. Ahh, so these are the authorities. Her friends were then given undeniably unlawful prison sentences. The nation itself was trash. Sugako became an anarchist. I wanna do something. But Kanson, Sakai, Osugi, all of her main comrades were in prison. While she was thinking this, Koutoku Shusui, who’d withdrawn to his home prefecture of Kokuchi when his health declined, returned to Tokyo and became active again. He was a socialist superstar. He suggested they start a magazine. Roger that.

But things just didn’t go well in general. Even if you put out a magazine, it’d be banned. Whatever tricks you used, however you tried not to fall astray of the law, power would ban it without a second thought. You couldn’t even engage in a war of words. As they tried to overcome these difficulties, Shusui and Sugako grew close. This was intimate, passionate sex. Kanson, who was imprisoned when he heard about it, flew into a rage. Later he’d start following the two around with a pistol. She was hated by their socialist comrades on the outside as well. It’s Sugako’s fault, her lechery made Kanson lose it. They called her a seductress and a poisonous woman. Even though it was this tendency to look down on others that was the breeding ground for all domination. Shusui and Sugako were isolated.

³ Prominent Japanese anarchist, later beaten to death by police in the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake along with Ito Noe and his nephew.

To hell with this world. There's no love lost with this rotten society. We've had enough of these petty, suffocating relationships between comrades. I could die right now, if I burned to a crisp this minute that would be fine by me. That's the kind of sex they were having. It was the logic of sex and death. The truth is they were both suffering from tuberculosis and had no idea how much longer they'd live. At that very time, Sugako and Shusui were also likely reading books by Russian nihilists. Young people in Russia were carrying bombs, risking their lives to kill the emperor there. Let's stop thinking of our own interests in this rotten world. Give up the body, just keep throwing yourself into action. This is what Shusui was saying. This wasn't about reason. When someone really takes a stand, they start moving naturally. Let's surrender ourselves to a "spontaneous" power that we can't even control with our will. Shusui called that "insurrection," *houki*.

Alright, what's our target? The imperial system. In Japan, humans dominating other humans was taken as a given. That's how it was with capitalists and workers, and with men and women. It was obvious that slaves would obey their masters. This was so because the master had status. The emperor was the foundation of this. Because they were under the protection of the emperor who was a living god, the subjects who were his children were able to live. Returning the favor, they paid taxes, and worked and went to war even if it meant their deaths. They had to liberate the masses from this delusion. They had to show them that, by blowing the emperor to smithereens once before everyone's eyes, this guy was just a human being.

Sugako was already frantic. I can't quit, I'm not stopping. It was then that a young man named Miyashita Takichi came from Aichi saying he'd make a bomb, so they made a plan to blow up the emperor with their trustworthy friends Niimura Tadao and Furukawa Rikisaku. In the middle of planning Shusui said "Actually, I'd really like to write," so they decided to make the move without dispatching him. They decided who'd start throwing bombs by lot, simple as that. But in 1910, Miyashita cheated with the partner of the friend to whom he'd entrusted the bombs. From that lovers' quarrel their plan was discovered, and they were arrested one after another. Shusui was arrested too. And friends of Shusui's who were actually totally uninvolved also kept getting arrested. It was six people in all. Framed by the prosecutor to look as if they had some grand master plan, a few of them got the death penalty for high treason and a few got life in prison. This was the High Treason Incident. An unprecedented hoax.

Because Sugako sowed the seeds for this incident, her image as a "witch" was preserved, but what struck me as wild on rereading Jakucho-san's book was the staggering sense of passion and speed with which she moves from sex with Shusui to the plot to blow up the emperor. I could die right now, I'm doing this knowing I'll die. That passion swells and explodes, leaving reason aside and connecting directly to terrorism. Of course, love and revolution are different things. But this book doesn't let the reader feel that. Love makes people into bombs. It makes you think that's obvious, that it's something that happens naturally. Jakucho-san becomes a "witch." Her writing becomes "insurrectionary," "spontaneous." Can I say this without being misunderstood? This book is dangerous.

I wish to believe only in absurd things

How about that. Couldn't we say that the way of thinking in which women are spoken of one-sidedly itself is being demolished by an overwhelming power? Man, as the subject of sex,

controlling woman as its object? Master and slave? That's the world of people? At the very least, Sugako made her own sexual desires explode, and with the blast, attempted to blow away the framework by which people control other people itself.

And then studying Shusui's ideology, changed her aim with ease, and put her own ideology into practice. No longer a slave. No longer a woman who was an object or a thing. Though with that said, she also wasn't trying to become a man. Neither master nor slave. Neither subject nor object. Taking the form of something not of this world, as if she'd slipped straight through the middle of those things. Then going to heaven in the blink of an eye.

And this isn't just what's in the story. I think it's got something to do with the way the story is told. I touched on this just before, but Jakucho-san becomes Sugako right before she's executed, looking back on her own life. Styled as a monologue. This works really well. The truth is that when you're writing something biographical, it's complicated by the fact that the closer you get to the modern era, the clearer historical fact becomes. Even if you've got lots of characters, you basically already know what kind of personalities they've got, how they mess up, and what happens to their final goals as a result.

Even so, you'll inevitably fail if you speak with a third-person perspective and objective voice. All that makes you is an omniscient author, moving your characters like chess pieces towards a goal. The story is closed. That's damn boring, most of all because all that's happening is me the subject controlling objects. There's no dreaming, and we don't overcome the world we're in. No matter how good the story's contents are, what gets unconsciously planted in other people is the cognition framework of the speaker dominating the one they're speaking about itself.

But Sugako's monologue leaps over that. The subject is "I" at baseline, but while you're reading it you lose track of who that is. Whose view is this? At times it becomes unclear. For example, the kind, older-sisterly, lover-like gaze with which she looks at Kanson. It's strangely real. Of course, before her execution Sugako asked after Kanson, so she probably felt sorry for how she treated him, and anxious about it. But in the book, those feelings are clearly in excess. Kinder and warmer than the real Sugako.

Certainly Jakucho-san become intimate with Kanson as well. Calling for a geisha in a fancy restaurant in Gion, eating lunch together. Kanson, who doesn't drink, eats turtle soup boiled in alcohol and falls on his face. Or else comforting him after he'd fallen in love with and then was brutally dumped by a forty-year-old turned ninety-year-old woman. Seeing him like that, doesn't that make you feel like an older sister, even if you're younger than him? But even so, you can't spell out Jakucho-san's feelings for Kanson just like that. In some respects what's written seems like how Kanson wanted to be thought of by Sugako. Who's speaking here? The distinction between the one speaking and the one being spoken about gets demolished. When people hear that voice, they can't help but fly out of the story. Emancipation, it feels good.

Thinking about it, some twenty years after this book, Jakucho-san would interpret the *Tale of Genji*, and here too you're sometimes surprised by completely losing who the subject is. It's that phenomenon that makes you feel like you're being stimulated by something not of this world. That's here in this book as well. In the final scene of the story, the previously executed Shusui appears, enticing Sugako to the scaffold. "It'll be over quick." Shusui whispers this to me. Something cold wraps around my neck. A feeling like a thin snake. My body flies in the air. Rainbows surround me. Innumerable rainbows intertwine and swirl around me. I'm flying with Shusui." (p. 298) What kind of power is driving this? It's got an irresistible power. It's a ghost. Way too scary.

Let's turn to the contents one final time. The book doesn't touch on this, but, what I like most about Sugako is that, with her execution before her, she likened her death to Jesus's sacrifice. This was in contrast to her former lover Shusui who wrote *Kirisuto Massatsu-ron*, where he likened the emperor to Christ, trying to obliterate every kind of authority. But really, weren't they saying the same thing? Jesus, near the end of his life, was betrayed by all his disciples, forgotten even by God, and fell into the depths of despair. Why do I have all the bad luck? These humans have nothing but ill intent, all they do is deceive and betray. Ahh, let there be an end to this world. But with all his efforts unrewarded, at the moment when he couldn't believe in anything anymore, he willed himself to believe that there was indeed good dwelling in people. A whisper suddenly rose to his lips. Oh Lord. It was baseless. But there was no room for doubt. No asking why. I believe because it's absurd. He was a saint.

It was the same for Sugako. Neither God nor Buddah had saved her. She'd been scapegoated by her socialist comrades. Even Shusui who she'd believed in had written a letter to his ex-wife trying to get back together. It was betrayal. I can't believe in anyone or anything. Why do I have all the bad luck? Let there be an end to this world. But when she was thinking this, I could die right now, sex, sex, terrorism. The moments where she and Shusui had tried to incinerate themselves sprang to mind. It wasn't a good thing at all. It's just that it hadn't been a total tragedy. But how many times would it turn out the same way, how many times would she do the same thing over again? Even if I she died, the person in the next world would be repeating things, over and over again. There was no asking why, she was moving without reason. Let's destroy all authority. We need not a single foundational truth. I wish to believe only in absurd things. Sugako became a saint. She became something not of this world. I think the charm of this book is its barefisted expression of this kind of uncanniness about Sugako. I can go anywhere if I'm with you, even to the scaffold in Ichigaya. God's dead. Sugako's flying.

(Researcher of anarchism)

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