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## Garden of Paradise. Japanese Identity in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*

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**Abstract:** This text focuses on the identity of the Japanese garden as an accomplished aesthetic act, in the manner depicted in the official diary of Sei Shonagon's, a lady living at the Japanese imperial court, around the year 1000. Nature is sieved through an aesthetics of concentric circles, in which human life turns into a painstakingly pen crafted page, strictly owing to the perfection of artistic integration in the nature. But Nature, and more specifically the garden that Sei Shonagon details with refinement in *The Pillow Book*, is a specific clue to the concept of Japanese identity.

**Keywords:** Sei Shonagon; Japanese Identity, Paradise; Garden; Epiphany; Akira Kurosawa.

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Sei Shonagon, who lived at the turn of the second millennium Japan, was known as a lady in attendance at the court of Empress Sadako. She also was the daughter of a beloved poet of that era. However she is best known for the 319 entries that make up *The Pillow Book*, a hybrid piece of writing, bordering on essay and poetic prose, structuring, at the same time, a colossal poem disseminated in the scraps of a mosaic.<sup>1</sup> Sei Shonagon's style is both simple and lacy. The Japanese tapestry she creates is cosmic and synaesthetic; spontaneity and laconism (technically speaking) are alternated with a mannerist, almost baroque refinement *avant la lettre*. Sei Shonagon's *Book* is marked by a pattern aesthetic formation, sealed in an imperial court, amongst aristocrats, where *dolce far niente* rules and where the development of the artistic spirit is promoted excessively.

The Japanese garden that Sei Shonagon details with refinement in *The Pillow Book* is not only a huge aesthetic gesture that validates Japanese genius, but also an attempt to establish a specific Japanese identity on a collective level. The Japanese garden is a national and imperial essence (or gradually becomes so as the diary is carefully written) in a way that the community itself is affirmed.

Sei Shonagon's paradisiacal approach depends strictly on an aestheticist orientation, which requires an over determined grid of artistic practices and hierarchies of beauty to gaze at things, nature and people. The eye trained to see the world in such tones has, from the very beginning, an unmitigated penchant for beauty. A mannerist eye, one would say: the eye of a hermeneutician who sees art everywhere, and who has paradise in her aesthetic sight from beginning to end. Sei Shonagon's radiographed paradise is always coherent, serene, and ecstatic. Its opposite is not hell, but rather non-paradise, or anti-paradise. Such a paradise-in-ruins or in disintegration is never independently negative, but only by comparison to the perfection of a paradise whose unblemished image designates the spiritual center of the world.<sup>2</sup> The author's main focus centers on the *numinous* Japanese garden, which fills her gaze with ecstasy: a powerful yet gentle, mystically inflected visual ecstasy. *The Pillow Book's* author confesses that visual or synaesthetic ecstasy makes her ascend to the heavens by propelling her to a non-terrestrial or para-terrestrial, in fact para-human world. Though she does not say it directly, Sei Shonagon has in mind the ecstatic disembodiment of the one who contemplates the Japanese world's consummate beauty and who, at that, should remain no more than a soul elevated to a supreme artistic rank. Sei Shonagon writes about a sensorial soul – which is truly novel in the author's aesthetic-oriented outlook –, or a body of the soul, in line with the Spanish mystics' formula! More specifically, she deals with three exacerbated senses – sight, smell, and hearing – which overlap synaesthetically to result in ecstasy. The supreme appeal in

perceptions and the aesthetic wholeness the author generally undertakes belong to the paradisiacal matrix in which she fits mainly as a gourmand gourmet taster of the world in its aesthetic explosion. The garden, its trees and flowers, become an act of creation which stimulates the "need for creative expression"<sup>3</sup>. In general, the garden both depends on and develops and tones the "art of seeing"<sup>4</sup>. Gardening is a form of civilization and education<sup>5</sup>; the one who listened to this noble lesson becomes an aesthete. Sei Shonagon is concerned, obsessively, we may say, with cataloguing and classifying the scraps of this visualized paradise, which enables her to later tailor an impressive tapestry: the seasons, the trees, the flowers, the landforms, the birds, the insects, the garments, the human beings. The author has a penchant for mapping out paradise, with all its living marks; because, obviously, the paradise catalogued by Sei Shonagon is a strikingly sensorial and artistic one. And thus, we will proceed to listing and commenting on the millennium-old Japanese noblewoman's tapestry work. There is little doubt that this work relies on the main religions in Japan, Shinto and Buddhism, within which scenery, poetry, ikebana and gardening were inseparable.

*The Pillow Book* begins with a panorama depicting the seasons, in brief flashes, with paradise first discerned and classified at a strictly visual level, by the correlation between light and darkness: spring is marked by the dawn and the pale sky, summer hinges on firefly-full nights or full mooned rains, in the autumn the evenings matter, and winter is valid aesthetically owing to the early mornings, snowfall, frost, freeze and warm rooms. The author

intends to be particularly a creator of transparent pastels: any sky, any morning, any night is beautiful. More precisely, any season and moment of the day is prone to being or becoming paradisiacal; and if it is not so from the beginning, it will soon be – beauty is contagious. The inventory of paradise is infinite and wrought: the names of Japanese mountains, plains, crests, ponds, seas, waterfalls, rivers, bridges, planes, sources, islands, shores, gulfs, forests are read like a sutra – and praised. And it's only their articulated (onomastic) summoning that is delivered to the reader as a form of absolute beauty! The expressive enumeration of these elements is artistic *par excellence*. Birds are praised without a fail, birds which always match the season and the natural environment to give paradise coherence, such as the nightingale and the cuckoo; insects are praised, too. However, there are always negative references to potential paradise-unworthy strangers (for example, flies and ants are reprovéd). Even some trees are reprimanded, such as the maple and the cypress (because are inaeesthetic), while others are praised excessively (plum trees, cherry trees, mandarins), while others yet are regarded neutrally (wild pear trees, oaks).

Earthly beauty is classified according to different visual and background states. Thus, as the author persuades the reader to select things, things that make your heart beat faster, things cherished from aforesite, things that make your heart cheerful, things of greatness, delicate things, particularly glorious and charming things. Nonetheless, even if only to some faint extent, there are also wretched and unbearable things, shameful things, things that drive one mad, melancholy things, ugly

things, desolate things, dreadful things and vulgar things. Sei Shonagon, it's been already said, never uses the word 'inferno' as opposed to paradise; she merely suggests what anti-paradise could be, i.e., the un-aesthetic, the non-beautiful, the visually mean dimension, which disrupt ecstasy and perfection. She is disturbed at the core by ugliness, by uncleanness, by desolation, ignorance and triviality. In the imperial court lady's perception, paradise is always (p)reserved to the aristocratic sphere. Beyond the aristocratic aura, in the plebeian environment that both ignores aestheticism and is non-aesthetic, paradise is no longer paradise. For example, "Snow on the houses of common people"<sup>6</sup> is illaudable! And, sometimes, even within the refined imperial bubble, the paradisiacal dimensions may shrink when, for a depressing instance, there falls "Persistent rain on the last day of the year"<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, paradise exists also by comparison to what lies below its heights!

A special descriptive passage is dedicated to the trees and flowers, whose chromatic fiesta falls under the insistent eye which knows how to relate it to the aesthetically oriented perfection of life. The chromatic celebration shines in the "alchemy of the plants"<sup>8</sup>, whose colors blend to embrace visual energies. The official imperial Japanese rituals that honor flowers such as the hollyhock, the iris, or the chrysanthemum, are thoroughly described, precisely because paradise is to be delivered painstakingly, conscientiously, to an embroidery conceived apologetically and an apotheotically. We can always notice either a chief chromatic feature, either by the tones or shades of the same color or by the contrasts among the colors of many

flowers: plum blossoms, cherry blossoms, etc. Alternatively, the contrast can be seen between flowers and leaves: “At the end of the fourth month and the beginning of the fifth,” writes Sei Shonagon, “the orange trees have dark green leaves and are covered with brilliant white flowers. In the early morning, when they have been sprinkled with rain, one feels that nothing in the world can match their charm; and, if one is fortunate enough to see the fruit itself, standing out like golden spheres among the flowers, it looks as beautiful as that most magnificent of sights, the cherry blossoms damp with morning dew”<sup>9</sup>. An accomplished floral celebration is the fifth month, owing to the iris, since all beings drape in iris flowers (even the common people’s hovels are decorated, ephemerally marked by paradise), and the letters laced with iris flowers are accomplishedly elegant. Notable is the praise of herbs, too (among these, the burdock, the ivy, the clover, the bamboo, and the reed mace). Flowers are aggrandized not only by the already established identities (cherry, plum, hollyhock, chrysanthemum, or the iris flower), but also by less illustrious flowers (sweet William, bluebell, or morning glories). Paradise is hierarchical: pond lilies under rain showers are beautiful, yet not as beautiful as blossomed plum trees, at sunset or at dawn! And if they are painted, the cherry or iris flowers waste their superlative magic! Hollyhock, chrysanthemum and iris celebrations are unrivaled; hence, the ecstasy prompted by their non-terrestrial beauty. No wonder that trees such as the plum or cherry tree, are hyperbolized: they hold the value of an entire landscape in the Japanese garden<sup>10</sup>. Above all the cherry tree is sacred, cherished because of its fragility.

Critters, too, are embellished with flowers – a hint that paradise is infectious: for instance, the imperial dog Okinamaro had been decorated once with willow branches, peach flowers and cherry tree branches! Nature is borrowed from outdoors and carried indoors: cherry tree flowers in a vase stand for the entire garden of paradise; alternatively, withered hollyhock flowers recall a former paradise, now grown old. In cozy rooms or official reception halls, porcelain vases carrying cherry tree branches dominate or transmit to the imperial compound the absolute beauty!

The garden and the plants that make it are also a test object for the man – earth relationship<sup>11</sup>. However, Sei Shonagon’s paradisiacal garden does not bear fruit as all gardens do: its rewards are of all things visual and olfactory; therefore, crop as such (grapes, fruit) is not necessary. Nutrition is of aesthetic kind only. Of course, even in the case of Empress Sadako’s aesthete court lady, the yearning for the palace gardens relates also to the human being’s longing for “chlorophilia”; even more, the statement that gardens satisfy a certain human “cosmophilia” may be valid, since gardens can also be read as “celebrations of chlorophilia”<sup>12</sup>.

However, one aspect is intriguing: Sei Shonagon does not discuss at all, does not even allude to the nature – art relationship. A millennium later, 21<sup>st</sup>-century garden philosophers state that the garden is not only nature or only art; it is both<sup>13</sup>. Sei Shonagon and her winning aesthetics, which monitors beauty in all shapes, be they delicate or flamboyant, see art sooner than nature in a garden, natural art, that is. The excellence of the artificial and of mimesis is implied by *The Pillow Book’s* author

only when branches or flowers are imported in indoor arrangements. To Sei Shonagon, the garden is or becomes a symptom of paradise: we can call it a symptom, but we could equally use tropes such as metaphor, symbol, allegory, or metonymy. Contemporary theorists of the garden discuss the meaning of the garden as reconciliation of opposites, respectively as reconciliation between nature and culture<sup>14</sup>. The paradox in Sei Shonagon is that she does not see any disagreement between the two structures, although she, from the outset, grants culture the essential role.

Another aspect that establishes paradise to and through Sei Shonagon's aesthetically oriented eye is represented by the intricate, baroque outfits at the imperial court: by these, human beings turn into human flowers, since all the finely cut clothing materials of the remarkable Japanese attire are conceived along floral lines; the silks, the linen drapery, the brocades, the fans are painted in order to obtain perfect ranges of colors. The woman's hairstyle and garments show them as a garden of paradise *in nuce*; however, the masculine representations at the imperial court fall nothing short of this pattern; men's attire is also floral imitation, by their overlapping layers. Therefore, aristocratic garments are tailored along vegetable, floral or tree lines; in Europe, such a dimension would have a Dionysian, pagan connotation; in classical Japan such vegetation belonged to a normal paradise, in which pantheism was constitutive and human life was carried on in line with the succession of the seasons. The ladies' ceremonial dresses and the men's attire are equally sophisticated; one's contemplation of them sinks in "delight" (voluptuousness), by the overflow of materials:

women and men are nothing but flowers and trees of the paradise! The range of colors in the silks and fabrics, in the China brocade, often elicits from Sei Shonagon not only elated whispers, but also an excess of visual hedonism that gives ends up in the ultimate verdict: splendor. Cloaks, jackets, sleeves, feet, tailored shorts, gowns, ribbons – all these are conceived as coats of the floral paradise imported to the human space, only to make it superhuman. The youth and children's floral corteges, in various ceremonies, or those of the noblewomen (iris in their hair, during the celebration of the iris, for instance) in the Empress's suite, the musicians and the dancers, all these are gathered together, leading to ecstasy. If human beings are decorated with flowers and branches, too, then the garden of paradise has been truly internalized. Naturally, the climax is given by the perspective on Empress Sadako: of a very white complexion, she wears contrastingly red clothes; at other times she wears three layers of scarlet dresses and red plum color brocade attire<sup>15</sup>; yet on some other occasion, the empress's white dresses are matched with a fiery red gown. The empress's sister, princess Shigeisa, is equally gracious: she wears only plum flower color dresses, a crimson vest and a green brocade cloak<sup>16</sup>! She dashes away the tears elicited by such visual ecstasy<sup>17</sup>. The artistic-visual beauty witnessed by *The Pillow Book's* author is decreed unearthly; hence, the intoxicating lunacy or madness, confessed by a Sei Shonagon overcome by the flowery fragrances, along with her self-confident verdict of the whole scene: "ceremonial splendor."

Couldn't the author be an aesthete intentionally high on the programmatically nurtured visuality? Couldn't Sei Shonagon

be demonstratively (often emphatically) self-intoxicated with and by the concrete idea of aesthetic beauty? Once, Eve had soiled the garden of paradise and the concrete notion of immortality, but it was still by Eve and owing to her that fecundity was kicked off. Therefore, Eve and woman, particularly, is not considered in vain the first gardener of the world, the primordial gardener<sup>18</sup>, a *raisonneur* of the garden and a guardian. In her way, Sei Shonagon, although belonging to a different civilization, makes no exception from that condensed rule.

However, at a certain time, the author's interrogation raises a socially-hierarchical issue, in which true aesthetic taste is attributed exclusively to the aristocratic sphere: why couldn't common people at least get a glimpse of that overwhelming beauty? Therefore, visual ecstasy is posited as a feature of aristocratic refinement and depends strictly on the artistic background at the imperial court. Sei Shonagon's visual paradise is coherent, serene and orderly; hence the author's disapproval of ignorance, incoherence or primitivism. It is only the aristocrats that can access this type of paradise: the garden is the perfect aesthetic cosmos and it is a visual honor to be related to this paradise. *The Pillow Book's* author belongs to a caste that relies on the imperial institutional perfection, so that the bucolic and the hyperbolizing perception of it depend on a programmatically artistic education. The microcosmic equilibrium is accomplished, because the aesthete's eye has long been trained to this end. Harmony is a prerequisite between nature and the aristocrat; this harmony is materialized by the fact that the human being can be visually constructed, like a

biped flower! Nonchalantly Sei Shonagon constructs and ranks epiphany as a device for scanning the earthly (para-human in the moments of supreme ecstasy) paradise that encloses the revealing mark of a scared reality. Paradise is here and now, coherent, geometrical and fully aesthetic. It's precisely the empress's visual accomplishment that ascertains this earthly paradise and acknowledges it, at the same time. The epiphany that occurs in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book* is an "epiphany of man's relationship to mystery", more precisely "an epiphany [...] of the relation between the source of the world and ourselves", the human beings, the garden being a "mysterious gift."<sup>19</sup>

Since *The Pillow Book's* author naturally ignores the biblical paradise, several symbolical and metaphorical affinities between the biblical Eden and the Japanese terrestrial paradise as described by Sei Shonagon become striking and are worth mentioning. The writer decrees paradisiacal perfection through the garden; the latter is marked by superlative grace, accomplished aesthetics, embracing an internalized sacredness. The Japanese extravagance and theatricality are seen in the various manners of joining, spectacularly and equally delicately, the flowers and the trees. While the biblical Paradise is forever green and in blossom (never withered), as the Church Fathers describe and analyze it, Sei Shonagon's Japanese paradise undergoes the impact of all the seasons, which can be perfect even during winter: the author's snow-covered pastels are equal to the summer, spring or autumn ones. No frosty winters, no torrid summers, no autumns marked by withering in the biblical Eden: there is nothing there

but eternal spring. The cosmic garden described by Sei Shonagon is subject to all the seasons from which beauty (and, at times, ugliness) is singularized. The main trees of the Japanese heavenly garden are, according to the author, the cherry tree and the plum tree; conversely, the cypress is non-paradisiacal, the same cypress that, in the biblical and Christian symbolic approach, is a paradisiacal tree<sup>20</sup>. The medieval Western icon painters represented the Edenic flora in detailed, multiple manners, by tens of flower species<sup>21</sup>; paradoxically or not, this is also valid and obvious in *The Pillow Book*. The rose is a central Christian symbol, the flower of Christ and the flower that Christ is; in Sei Shonagon, the iris, the cherry blossom, the plum blossom, the chrysanthemum and the hollyhock populate the epitome of the floral world! However, the synaesthetic effect of paradise is valid both in the biblical view<sup>22</sup> and in the Japanese lady's book. Sei Shonagon is biased in representing the range of colors and the fragrances of the earthly paradise embodied by the Japanese garden: seeing and smelling become performing perfect aesthetic skills. Nevertheless, as opposed to the biblical Eden, where the chosen ones are naked, the Japanese author shows, as expected, extreme delicateness: the body is permanently concealed by various layers of garments; only the hands, the face and the hair are revealed. The supreme symbol of this camouflage and, at the same time, the trophy of the earthly paradise garden, according to Sei Shonagon, is Empress Sadako: so aesthetically pure that the remote onlooker, (today's reader, for example) does not know whether to read her as the perfect puppet (visually speaking) or as a Japanese equivalent of Virgin Mary

Crowned as Queen of the Heavens. This is not just some other speculation; in fact, the method of *The Pillow Book's* author is one of aesthetic-oriented beatification of the Empress: her apotheosis.

In his movie, *Dreams*, (1990), Akira Kurosawa assembles an episode (the second in the sequence of filmic chapters) named "The Peach Orchard," where the disintegration of paradise is discussed. The garden of paradise has been destroyed by cutting (this episode can also be read as a post-Chekhovian answer to *The Cherry Orchard*), and the spirits of the peach trees appear exclusively to a child, thus guided toward the former paradise by a female spirit, a girl-peach tree. The child is explained the loss of paradise and the (adult) man's destructive interference, precisely because only a human being still pure could have access to the former garden of paradise. Hence, the peach orchard is reconstructed, ephemerally, in its entire splendor. However, the stake is that this child, once initiated in the garden of paradise, will be able to introduce, at some future time, the presently lost paradise or at least could speak to others about it. The child's tears facing the mutilated garden and the story of its mutilation determine his being chosen by the spirits of the peach trees as confessor and spectator of the former splendor. In his manner, Kurosawa follows Sei Shonagon, but in reverse: he parallels paradise and non-paradise (or anti-paradise), radically, using the same component – the garden, that is the peach orchard. In fact, Kurosawa attempts to establish a paradise ethics; it is ethics that matters to Kurosawa, and not epiphany, as it does to Sei Shonagon.

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## NOTES

1. The Heian period was marked, from a literary point of view, not only by Sei Shonagon's gracely written mosaic, but also by *The Tale of Genji*, written by noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu.
2. Christopher McIntosh, *Gardens of the Gods. Myth, Magic and Meaning*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp. 5, 20, 21.
3. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens. An Essay on the Human Behaviour*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 43.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 114.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 32.
6. Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*, translated and edited by Ivan Morris, Columbia University Press New York, 1991, p. 67.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 46.
8. McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
9. Sei Shonagon, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.
10. Jack Hobson, *Niwaki. Pruning, Training and Shaping Trees the Japanese Way*, Portland, Oregon, Timber Press, 2007, p. 17.
11. Robert Pogue Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
12. *Ibidem*, pp. 43, 44, 56.
13. David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006, p. 41.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 127.
15. Sei Shonagon, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 162.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 186.
18. Robert Pogue Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
19. David E. Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 150, 160.
20. Jean Delumeau, *Que reste-t-il du paradis?*, Paris, Fayard, 2000, p. 127.
21. *Ibidem*, pp. 129-132.
22. *Ibidem*, pp. 146-149.