

'Monkey Meat' and Metaphor in Shohei Ooka's *Fires on the Plain*

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Abstract

In Fires on the Plain (1952) novelist Shohei Ooka critiques Japanese imperialism by depicting the collapse of the Japanese army in the Philippines during the final months of World War II. Structured as a post-war memoir written by a soldier named Private Tamura as a patient in a Tokyo mental hospital, the novel explores Tamura's psychological breakdown in response to having succumbed to cannibalism in order to survive. A complex treatment of memory, guilt, and individual agency in times of war, Fires on the Plain also underscores the ways in which the cannibalistic act may function metaphorically as a commentary on matters related to sex, religion, militarism, and cultural imperialism, as well as revealing anxieties associated with the creation of a post-war narrative of national victimhood in Japan. While Ooka presents Tamura's eating of human flesh as the culmination of his long descent into madness, the act also serves as a metaphor through which he explores the self-destructive nature of Japanese imperialism, as well as his own responsibility for his unwilling participation in it.

Keywords: wartime cannibalism; survival cannibalism; ritual cannibalism; Japanese imperialism; war crimes; Christianity

'Monkey Meat' and Metaphor in Shohei Ooka's *Fires on the Plain*

Shohei Ooka's 1952 novel *Fires on the Plain (Nobi)* recounts the collapse of the Japanese army in the Philippines towards the end of World War II. Loosely based on Ooka's experiences as a 35-year-old conscript who was separated from his unit on Mindoro and later captured and sent to an American P.O.W. camp, the novel is both a searing critique of Japanese militarism and a broader examination of the horror and insanity of war. Expelled from his platoon in order to preserve food for the others, the tubercular Private Tamura is forced to fend for himself amid the months-long chaos of battle and retreat, eventually succumbing to cannibalism in order to survive. While Ooka presents Tamura's eating of human flesh as the culmination of his long descent into madness, the act also serves as a metaphor through which he explores the self-destructive nature of Japanese imperialism, as well as his own responsibility for his unwilling participation in it. In this article, I will attempt to illuminate Ooka's depiction of cannibalism in *Fires on the Plain* first by addressing it within the context of wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army and Ooka's post-war response to them, both in the novel and his memoirs. Then, focusing on the chapter 'The Starving and the Mad', I will show how Ooka's depiction of Tamura's self-justifications and selective amnesia transgresses and disrupts categories based on binary oppositions, extending the metaphor of cannibalism to complicate issues related to imperialism, particularly through his allusion to Chinese author Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman'. Finally, through his ambivalent appeal to Christianity, I will argue that, ironically, Ooka damns Tamura in the end of the novel for his refusal to participate in the cannibalistic act; thereby creating a text that, ultimately, consumes itself.

Although cannibalism and murder with the intent to commit cannibalism were both explicitly outlawed by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II, there is overwhelming evidence for both practices, particularly in New Guinea beginning around mid-1944 and in the Philippines in the final months of the war: the period covered in Ooka's novel (**Tanaka, 1996: 128**). In its attempts to come to terms with defeat and the conduct of the army in the war, the Japanese government never acknowledged cannibalism by soldiers; nor did the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal conducted by the Allies from 1946 to 1948, which did not identify or prosecute acts of cannibalism. As part of his plan for post-war occupation—which relied in part on a concerted propaganda effort to encourage the Japanese to reject twentieth-century imperialism as an anomaly in the nation's history—General Douglas MacArthur allowed Emperor Hirohito to keep the throne, refusing to prosecute him for war crimes and casting him as having been

manipulated by military leaders such as General Hideki Tojo (**Ibid: xix–xx**). In having saved Japan from annihilation by opposing his generals, Hirohito came to be seen as a peacemaker and, more importantly, a victim of the runaway militarism that had distorted the nation's character. As many scholars have pointed out, this failure to hold the emperor responsible – along with a growing self-image formulated on the Japanese having been victims of the only atomic bombs ever used in combat – enabled Japanese society as a whole to avoid examining its own culpability in imperialist atrocities such as the Rape of Nanking. In the absence of official acknowledgment of wartime cannibalism, the primary contemporaneous accounts are memoirs by former soldiers such as Shoji Ogawa and Harumichi Nogi, who, along with Ooka, show Japanese cannibals preying almost exclusively on their fellow soldiers rather than P.O.W.s or natives in occupied territories (**Ibid: 126**). As such, Japanese soldiers, as both perpetrators and prey, can through shared dehumanisation be seen as victims of the imperial war machine.

While evidence of cannibalism was not presented before the Tokyo tribunal, Australian and American military inquests documented in graphic detail numerous cases of the bodies of Allied soldiers being butchered and eaten by Japanese soldiers in New Guinea and the Philippines. In addition to 'white pork', Japanese soldiers also fed on 'black pork' in New Guinea, a term encompassing not only natives of the island but also the large number of Indian, Pakistani, and Malaysian prisoners of war brought in as slave labour. According to accounts of survivors, prisoners who were too sick to work would be shot and eaten, and some victims were kept alive while being butchered over the course of several days in order to keep the meat from putrefying, a constant threat in the tropical climate (**Ibid: 121**). Eventually, as the already inadequate supply lines were cut completely, some Japanese soldiers turned to 'yellow pork' (**Calman, 1992: 183**). In fact, in some cases, not to commit cannibalism was seen as a breach of duty and could lead to severe consequences. In the 1987 documentary *The Naked Emperor Marches On*, for instance, filmmaker Kuzuo Hara examines a case in which two privates in New Guinea who refused to participate in cannibalistic acts with the rest of their unit were executed—having ironically been charged with cannibalism themselves—in order to provide food for officers. There is a certain perverse logic involved in the dehumanisation of the racial Other from prisoner to slave to 'human cattle' (**Tanaka, 1996: 126**). Consuming the flesh of one's own fellow soldiers, however, is an act that seems beyond the bounds of rational explanation, even in the extreme conditions of the New Guinea campaign, where Japanese forces suffered a 94% mortality rate. What is even more remarkable is that the widespread recourse to cannibalism in this case was not the result of a collapse of military cohesiveness and morale. 'To the

contrary', Toshiyuki Tanaka writes, 'cannibalism was often a systematic activity conducted by whole squads and under the command of officers. Throughout periods of starvation and cannibalism, discipline was maintained to an astonishing degree' (1996: 127). Rather than an aberration in the conduct of war in extreme circumstances, cannibalism in this case seems to be the manifestation of militarism in its most perfect form.

Although Ooka does ultimately identify imperialist ideology as manifested in the military hierarchy with the figure of Yasuda and his one-man army Nagamatsu, the bulk of the novel focuses on the period after the collapse of any command structure in the Philippines, leaving the decision to eat human flesh with all its ethical consequences up to the individual actor. However, Ooka presents the story from the point of view of a character struggling with his own complicity in actions that he commits, but for which he is arguably not completely responsible; and, moreover, these actions are filtered through memories so overwhelming that they inevitably break off before they can be fully realised. Rather than offering a straightforward recounting of events, the novel instead constantly negotiates the shifting relationships among act, memory, and meaning, forcing the reader to grapple along with Private Tamura in piecing together what exactly he may have done in the Philippines and what it implies. Ooka further complicated the novel in 1953 in a short essay entitled '*Nobi no ito*', in which he claims that Tamura, 'although wanting to eat human flesh, cannot, spitting it out instead' (qtd. in Lofgren, 2004: 403). This assertion is clearly contradicted by the text of *Fires on the Plain*, in which Tamura eats 'monkey meat' (220)ⁱ supplied by Nagamatsu at the end of the novel multiple times—otherwise he would not have survived—and, though reluctant to admit it, he is fully aware of its origin. Furthermore, in recounting his story up to the point when he reconnects with Nagamatsu, Tamura suffers memory loss and suspends the narrative at precisely the moments he has the opportunity to feed on human flesh, which strongly implies that he is repressing other instances of cannibalism as well. Erik R. Lofgren argues that Ooka's denial of Tamura's complicity in cannibalism marks the moment when the 'mythology of Japanese war victimhood began to eclipse the discourse of war guilt operative under the American Occupation' and illustrates 'the dominance that the discourse came to have in subsequent years' (Lofgren, 2004: 413-14). In the 1959 film version of *Nobi*, Tamura is also unable to eat the proffered 'monkey meat', spitting it out along with a couple of teeth, seemingly solidifying the triumph of the ideology of victimhood. While Ooka's attempt to revise the meaning of the novel—he later insisted Tamura's refusal was an 'ethical choice' (qtd. in Lofgren, 2004: 410)—reflects this post-occupation cultural shift, the fact is that *Fires on the Plain* captures the period when Japan we still trying to

come to terms with imperialism and defeat and the wounds were too raw to be easily contained by any ideological position. Ooka may also have been attempting to deflect questions about whether or not he had succumbed to cannibalism in the Philippines back onto the novel in order to remind readers that truth is contingent on many levels and that what is important is how we negotiate its myriad meanings. As Marshall Sahlins says, 'cannibalism is always "symbolic," even when it is "real"' (Eckholm, 1986).

As a way of approaching *Fires on the Plain*, I will focus on the chapter entitled 'The Starving and the Mad': this chapter is positioned about two-thirds of the way through the novel. After Tamura is sent to a field hospital—into which he is denied admittance because he cannot supply his own rations—he bonds briefly with other hospital rejects before being separated from them during an American bombing raid. Once again alone, he finds a deserted cabin in the woods, which he describes as a 'paradise' (74), both for the safety it affords and its supply of readily available food. Following a dream in which he confronts his own corpse, he descends into a nearby village, which he also finds to be deserted, except for dogs, carrion crows, and the mutilated bodies of a group of Japanese soldiers who have apparently been ambushed and killed on the steps of the village church. He enters the church and re-enacts to some degree the dream from the night before and then decides to explore the presbytery next door. There he falls asleep on a sofa, only to be awakened by the voices of a Filipino couple who have come in the night to recover some salt that has been hidden in the kitchen. Tamura surprises the couple and asks them for a match; he then shoots the woman when she screams. The man flees and Tamura finds the salt, which serves as a type of currency when he leaves his paradise and joins a group of soldiers who are attempting to make their way to the staging area for the Japanese retreat. (Incidentally, these soldiers are veterans of the New Guinea campaign and joke with Tamura, telling him, 'If you really want to come with us, you better look sharp or we'll be eating you with our potatoes' (125).) Finding the way blocked by American forces, Tamura is again separated from his companions and witnesses a Filipina partisan executing a Japanese soldier trying to surrender. After this experience he claims to have no clear memories, writing 'I was certainly living. But I had no consciousness of being alive' (172).

At this point in the novel Tamura suspends the narrative to reflect on these events in 'The Starving and the Mad'. It is typical of Ooka's style in *Fires on the Plain* to have Tamura relate an experience as it is happening and then to revisit it, sometimes several times, usually to analyse his stated intention in the light of what he has come to recognise as an ulterior motive or to revise his interpretation of the significance of the event

through the filter of some new perspective. For instance, when Tamura first notices the 'fires of the plain' of the novel's title, he assumes that they are merely the result of Filipino farmers burning off the chaff of their fields after harvest: he wonders later if they might be signs of some sort, before finally realising that the Filipinos are actually using them to signal Japanese troop locations for American bombers. Indeed, reading the novel requires a constant reassessment of relevant facts; a process that culminates with the revelation in the final chapters that the narrative is not a straightforward account of events, but the text of an unreliable, self-serving apologia written by Tamura in a Tokyo mental hospital five years after the war.

In 'The Starving and the Mad', Tamura recalls the corpses on the church steps and his supposition that they had been the victims of an ambush. At the time he had noticed a cleaver on the steps and had assumed that it had been used as a weapon by one of the villagers. He had also noticed that a number of the soldiers were missing their buttocks, which he had assumed had been eaten by dogs and birds. However, after happening 'to notice a body that still retained some suppleness' and suddenly feeling 'a desire to eat its flesh' (177), he comes to the conclusion that the cleaver was not a weapon but a culinary instrument that had been used to butcher the bodies of the soldiers, the buttocks providing the most accessible and substantial cuts of meat. Although this epiphany (which may or may not reflect reality; what is important is that Tamura thinks it does) is a direct result of Tamura's own instinctual desire for self-preservation, he immediately distances himself from the thought, writing:

Yet I could not accept the idea that cannibalism had come to me as a natural instinct. Never, I thought, would it have occurred to me to alleviate my hunger in this way had I not heard the story of how the survivors of the Medusa ate each other on their raft, and later listened to reports of cannibalism on Guadalcanal and hints of the same practice from New Guinea. Anthropology has, of course, clearly established that in prehistoric times people did eat each other, just as that primitive societies practice incest; but for us who live in the shadow of a long history and deeply rooted custom it is impossible without an access of abhorrence to imagine fornicating with our mothers or eating human flesh. (177-78)

In other words, cannibalism is an unnatural act, except to the degree that it was practiced in a state of nature by primitive societies; and unthinkable to civilised human beings except those, of course, from whom Tamura claims to have gotten the idea in the first place. This type of illogic is typical of Tamura's pattern of denial and self-justification, but it also illuminates Ooka's use of cannibalism to underscore the operation of imperialist

ideology in the novel. For one thing, this paragraph echoes an episode in *Before Capture*, Ooka's 1945 memoir, of which *Fires on the Plain* is largely a fictional reimagining. In *Before Capture*, Ooka recounts the story of a fellow P.O.W. named Sergeant Kurokawa, a veteran of the Japan-China war who had led a group of soldiers who had managed to evade American forces into hiding in the mountains of Mindoro. Tiring of roots and nuts and an occasional foray into a deserted village, Kurokawa, apparently in all seriousness, had 'proposed finding, killing, and eating a Filipino the next time they ventured to the coast' (qtd. in Stahl, 2003: 78). Horrified by Kurokawa's callousness, Ooka writes:

While the tragedy that occurred on the Medusa raft is beyond reproach, I cannot help but condemn the Japanese officers who dined on the flesh of prisoners of war. . . . Their criminal acts resulted from their perverted hatred of the enemy and their frontline gormandism. Kurokawa's thought of eating a Filipino was no different. He came up with the idea before his men, who were themselves hungry, because of the "by any means" convention he had internalized as a brutal soldier during the Japan-China war and based on his thinking as an oppressor that the people in the areas he occupied were subhuman. (qtd. in Stahl, 2003: 79)

Ooka sees Kurokawa as a monster, but he emphasises that he is also a victim in a sense, the product of the imperialist mindset that depends on the dehumanisation of conquered peoples. In 'Before Capture', Ooka casts survival cannibalism (like that on the raft of the *Medusa*) as 'above reproach' – a tragic, but understandable, response to dire circumstances. In *Fires on the Plain*, however, Tamura implies that cannibalism for any reason is abhorrent—as unthinkable as incest—to any civilised human being. Of course, Tamura's hold on sanity requires him not to admit certain truths about himself, and his insistence on a bright line between civilisation and savagery is a way for him to maintain the illusion of psychological and moral integrity. His reference to 'incest' (178) is telling, though: as with cannibalism, incest violates clearly defined categories based on binary opposition (one should not be both mother and wife to the same man, just as one should not be both human and meat) and is therefore taboo since it erodes exactly the type of distinctions that allow social groups to define themselves against others. Tamura is civilised, so he cannot be a savage; he is Japanese—the product of 'a long history and deeply rooted custom' (178)—so he cannot be a cannibal. Attempting to maintain his sanity through the compartmentalisation of uncomfortable truths only exacerbates the problem, however, as he becomes more and more dissociated from himself, eventually experiencing what he describes as being 'sundered into two half-bodies' (191), each of which seems to operate separately from the other. Although

not being able to control one's own body would seem to indicate a clear break with rationality, Ooka emphasises the fact that for a conscript into the imperial army like Tamura (or himself), true self-determination—control of one's body and one's actions, as well as one's words or even thoughts—is little more than an illusion to begin with.

Ooka's metaphorical use of cannibalism also serves as a commentary on the nature of imperialism through a key intertext that, like his reference to the raft of the *Medusa*, reveals the tensions between the specific historical context of the novel and its larger implications. The third chapter from the end of the novel is entitled 'A Madman's Diary', an allusion to Lu Xun's 1918 story of the same name. A seminal work in the New Culture movement in China, Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' is also a frame narrative and purports to be a selection of writings during a bout of madness by a young man who had subsequently regained his sanity (21). Like Ooka, Lu Xun uses the metaphor of cannibalism to critique traditional society, as the young man discerns cannibalistic intent in the eyes of not only his neighbours, the peasants who work on his family's estate, and his family itself, but also in the pages of history, the subtext of every line of every work of Chinese history seeming to call out, 'Eat people!' (24). While there are a number of parallels between 'A Madman's Diary' and *Fires of the Plain*, the most germane in this context is the influence of incipient Japanese imperialist ideology on Lu Xun's work, the seeds of which had been sowed long before World War II.

Briefly: in the 1870s American marine biologist Edward S. Morse discovered a shell mound in Omori, near Tokyo, and excavations quickly revealed that the prehistoric inhabitants of the area had practiced cannibalism through the unearthing of a number of artefacts (including charred human bones and cooking utensils) (Morse, 1879: 17–18). This discovery caused a sensation, even though it soon became clear that these early inhabitants were not related to the current inhabitants of the islands, having been displaced first by the Ainu, who were displaced in turn by the ancestors of the modern Japanese. As part of the larger intellectual project of reassessment and self-definition that took place during the Meiji period, Japanese scholars, intrigued by these findings, began to search archives for evidence of cannibalism in historical times but found very few references related to Japan. However, when they turned to Chinese sources, they discovered numerous records of cannibalistic acts over that culture's long history, although cannibalism was a topic of little interest in China at the time. In fact, as Xiaolu Ma argues, Lu Xun probably learned about the history of Chinese cannibalism from Japanese literary critic Haga Yaichi, whose *Ten Articles on National Character* his brother owned, and which cites a number of acts of cannibalism from *History as a Mirror*, the comprehensive Chinese chronicle (Ma, 2014: 343). When Lu Xun casts

feudal Chinese society as essentially cannibalistic, then, he is doing so by filtering his own history through Japanese scholarship influenced by American scientific exploration—a perfect example of the way cannibalism dissolves symbolic borders, generating multiple meanings within a single framework, even while resisting a unified explanation of a single event.

For Ooka, then, to evoke the form and title of Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' is both an acknowledgement and a conscious reversal of transcultural influence; more significantly, though, Ooka is able to appropriate Lu Xun's story as a model of self-critique, since the discovery of cannibalism in other Asian cultures contributed to Japanese nationalism and its justification of imperial expansion through appeals to racial superiority—an ideology most succinctly expressed in the phrase 'Eat people!' Ooka was horrified by accounts of cannibalism by Japanese soldiers: not because of the acts themselves but because in many cases they seemed not to have been necessitated by starvation and were instead the grotesque manifestation of what he calls 'frontline gormandism' (**qtd. in Stahl, 2003: 79**), the will to power expressed through fine dining. In Lu Xun's story, the frame is a short introduction in classical Chinese that assures the reader that what follows are the rantings in vernacular language of a madman who has since recovered, thereby safely containing any subversive ideas, should the reader wish to maintain plausible deniability. In *Fires on the Plain*, however, Ooka breaks the frame, ending the novel not with 'A Madman's Diary' but with 'A Dead Man's Writings', part confession and part fever dream, which in the present tense brings together the composition of the novel and its missing pages. These are the episodes that Tamura claims not to remember, but that emerge in real time as he writes them.

In keeping with Ooka's recursive style, we can find the germ of this final chapter by returning to 'The Starving and the Mad'. After his assertion that cannibalism and civilisation are irreconcilable, Tamura admits that his predicament may offer 'an extreme exception to the normal human condition' (**178**). What stops him from acting on the desire to consume human flesh, however, is the feeling that he is being watched, though by whom he cannot say. 'It could not be that Filipino woman', he muses. 'After all, I had not eaten her; I had only killed her' (**178**). Although Tamura has turned this episode over and over again in his mind, trying to absolve himself of her death, this is the first indication that he may have eaten her flesh, and the casual manner in which he mentions it only underscores the enormity of the repressed guilt he seems on the verge of acknowledging. Even more telling is the sentence that proceeds his assertion that he hesitated before acting on the impulse to eat her: 'I cannot tell whether or not this new desire of mine was natural; for I have forgotten what I really felt at the time—just as lovers forget the exact

feeling that they experienced at a certain moment in their intercourse' (178). In another context, the scene with the Filipino couple would read as an unfortunate interruption of a romantic getaway – the young lovers having escaped the cares of the world by sneaking away to a secret hideout – and Ooka manipulates this narrative expectation in order to heighten the tension of the scene, which culminates in a symbolic rape as Tamura shoots the woman with his rifle. Of course, Tamura minimises his own agency, claiming that it 'was simply by chance that the bullet entered her chest' (118), but this is very much in keeping with Ooka's use of language to create a paradoxical 'present absence' that functions in the same way as cannibalism does in the novel: an act that is both natural and unnatural, committed by a self that both watches and is observed, and is intensely experienced in the moment and immediately forgotten. By destabilising conceptual categories, cannibalism eventually collapses them altogether.

Climbing a hill in order to better view a beautiful crimson sunset, Tamura then finds a dying Japanese officer leaning against the trunk of the only tree at the top. In an obvious allusion to the Buddha's moment of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the officer indicates the 'burning' sunset and cries out, 'The Western Paradise! Buddha is Amida. One is one. Two is two. I join my hands in prayer' (180). Tamura stays with him during the night as he fades in and out of consciousness, calling out to the Buddha and the Emperor in turn. Finally, just before he dies, he tells Tamura that when he is dead, Tamura may eat his hand. Tamura immediately conflates the officer's suggestion with the Christian Eucharist and experiences a vision of Dame Kind, through which he apprehends the essential unity of all living things. A flower speaks to him, saying, 'You may eat me if you like' (190), but his left hand will not allow his right hand to pluck it; indeed, his left hand will not let him use his right hand to eat at all, and he recognises that, although the right side of his body is starving to death, the left side welcomes the transfiguration this represents. Renouncing eating living things in order to live, he resigns himself instead to being eaten by insects, whom, when they begin to swarm his body, his hands refuse to drive away.

One striking aspect of *Fires on the Plain* is the degree to which its religious themes are figured as explicitly Christian. While the Japanese officer who offers Tamura his flesh evokes the Buddha, Tamura interprets the act almost exclusively in terms of the Eucharist. Tamura also imagines that he sees the eyes of the Buddha watching him from the forest, but these turn out to be the eyes of a soldier who is drawing his sights down the barrel of his rifle on a potential meal. As a teenager, Ooka studied at a school run by Methodist missionaries and, having converted to the faith, considered becoming a minister for a time before eventually abandoning religion

(Stahl, 2003: 2). In *Fires on the Plain*, Tamura explains his spiritual journey in much the same way:

The cross was to me a familiar thing. In my childhood this symbol of a foreign religion had penetrated even the smallest Japanese hamlet. At first I had approached it out of curiosity; then I had become fascinated with the romantic creed that it represented. But, later, an agnostic education had separated me from what I then came to regard as childish delusions... (80)

It is tempting to read Ooka's identification of Christianity as a 'foreign religion' as a commentary on Western cultural imperialism, the dark double of Japan's imperial expansion leading up to World War II. While this is true to a degree, it should also be noted that in the 1930s, as the Japanese government sought to bring all institutional religion into line with imperial goals, Japanese Christians supported expansion into Manchuria and China and saw their own missionary efforts as contributing in a positive way to the spread of empire. Christianity as a symbol of imperialism, then, functions as a double-edged sword: both a sign of Western ideological penetration into Asia and a weapon wielded by Japanese expansionists in pursuit of their own goals.

Following his epiphany regarding the interconnectness of all living things, Tamura is discovered by Nagamatsu, a young soldier whom Tamura had met among the rejects from the hospital and had observed as he formed a father-son bond with an older soldier named Yasuda. Tamura initially sees a glimmer of hope in the fact that such a relationship can develop amid 'the bestial residue of a defeated army' (53), but when he encounters them again during the retreat, Nagamatsu complains to Tamura that Yasuda has made him 'his servant in everything but name' (135). Due to ulcers on his feet, Yasuda cannot walk without Nagamatsu's help and is completely dependent on the young man; however, Nagamatsu is also dependent on Yasuda, who has managed to secure a quantity of tobacco and sends Nagamatsu out to trade it for food for the both of them. Originally a critique of the way social conventions distort family bonds—Nagamatsu is the son of a maid who rejects him as a bastard when he leaves his father's house to seek her out, and Yasuda has a son by a waitress who is raised by his married brother and whom he is not allowed to acknowledge—the relationship is here transformed through the master-slave dialectic into a critique of capitalism, as Nagamatsu recognises the absurdity of a situation in which he does all the work for a boss who cannot survive without him, his only reward constant abuse and just enough sustenance to keep doing it. Nevertheless, he knows he will not break away from Yasuda and rebuffs Tamura when he suggests that

he just take the tobacco and leave, saying, 'The trouble is, I don't think I can manage by myself' (138-39).

When Tamura reconnects with Nagamatsu and Yasuda at the end of the novel, their relationship has evolved even further. In a grotesque parody of military leadership (perhaps even implicating the Emperor himself) the seemingly-immobilised Yasuda sends out Nagamatsu to hunt 'monkeys' and bring back the meat for them to eat for the promise of a postprandial smoke. As Tamura begins to recover his health, he becomes aware of what is happening and even asks Nagamatsu if he 'didn't by any chance mistake me for a monkey' (200). Of course, by using the metaphor 'monkey meat' Nagamatsu is able to obscure the truth through a double linguistic turn. However, the term also works on several other levels since human beings are monkeys, more or less: what distinguishes, or should distinguish, us is a moral consciousness, without which we are bound only by the law of the jungle; eat or be eaten. Nagamatsu uses the term as a type of psychological prophylactic in order to protect himself from the true nature of his actions, but Ooka's point may be that when human beings are forced through extreme circumstances to examine their base nature, there's not much of a distinction at all.

It also soon becomes clear that Nagamatsu has come to the conclusion that it is only a matter of time before Yasuda kills him and has saved Tamura, not out of any ethical consideration, but so that he can help him strike first. When Yasuda appropriates his hand grenade, Tamura understands the situation as well. In his memoir 'Before Capture', Ooka writes that when he was separated from his unit in the Philippines and wandered in the jungle for weeks in a malarial haze, he remained cogent enough to keep one hand grenade so that, when he became desperate enough, he would be able to commit suicide. When the time came and he pulled the pin, however, the grenade failed to explode. Ooka interpreted this failure as emblematic of the absurd position of a soldier in wartime, whose fate is accomplished regardless or despite of his intentions and is instead determined by random, external forces beyond his control or even awareness (Stahl, 2003: 49). In *Fires on the Plain*, though, by having Yasuda take the grenade and actively plan and execute an ambush with it, Ooka explicitly assigns guilt where it belongs: at the highest levels of military and political leadership. What may appear to the common soldier random, inexplicable events are actually the result – though unforeseeable – of conscious decisions made and executed up and down the chain of command. Yasuda's attack fails, and Nagamatsu shoots him. When Tamura sees Nagamatsu leap on Yasuda's corpse to begin butchering it, he undergoes a new transfiguration. Tamura explains:

I was seized with anger: if as a result of hunger human beings were constrained to eat each other, then this world of ours was no more than the result of God's wrath. And if I at this moment could vomit forth anger, then I, who was no longer human, must be an angel of God, an instrument of God's wrath. (223)

While Tamura's earlier encounter with the Japanese officer had revealed to him the interconnectedness of all life, he now realises that this fundamental unity is less peaceful coexistence and more like the Schopenhauerian Will, endlessly striving and blindly consuming, feeding on itself eternally like the uroborus without ever being filled. Tamura kills Nagamatsu and asserts unconvincingly, 'I did not eat his flesh; this I should certainly have remembered' (224). A Christian takes communion in order to become one with Christ; the act of ritual cannibalism is the means by which the believer participates in His divinity. Here, the consumption of human flesh—'monkey meat'—results in a much more savage transformation.

In the final, hallucinatory chapter, 'A Dead Man's Writings', Tamura recounts the moments before his capture when, having become an angel of wrath, he had gone down into the burning plain to exact vengeance and 'eat my fellow man as a means of chastisement' (246). Caught in the conflagration (which cannot help but evoke the atomic bombs that incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki), he sees 'the people I have killed' emerge from the flames. Strangely, they are transported by 'celestial laughter' (245). At this moment, Tamura also experiences 'a painful joy' as he is struck in the head from behind and knocked out. Tamura interprets this as an act of grace: after denying throughout the novel that he had eaten human flesh, or at least had intended to, or at least had killed in order to, he finally accepts that he is an avenging angel who must kill and consume all who come before him as an agent of ultimate justice—only to be spared from this terrible destiny by an unseen blow. The novel then ends with a hymn of praise:

If he who struck me was that great man who on the crimson hilltop offered me his own flesh to relieve my starvation...

If this was a transfiguration of Christ Himself...

If He had indeed for my sake alone been sent down to this mountain field in the Philippines...

Then glory be to God. (246; ellipses Ooka's)

Though Tamura seems to praise God for sparing him, these lines are deeply ironic, as what he claims God is sparing him from is the act of cannibalism—in Christian terms communion—for Protestants the

symbolic and for Catholics the literal consumption of the body and blood of Christ. In other words, despite having previously welcomed becoming an instrument of divine wrath, Tamura here defines salvation as being denied oneness with God. Having seen how God accomplishes His will on earth—through the horrors of a war in which all standards of truth, morality, selfhood, and responsibility are stripped of meaning, leaving only corrupt flesh, which eats and is eaten—he can only save himself by refusing to implicate himself in its unfolding. He casts himself as victim and avenger of the ultimate inhuman act but not participant in it, denying himself the salvation that can only be achieved through consumption of divine human flesh and thereby sentencing himself to eternal, self-perpetuating damnation among the fires on the plain.

In this multifaceted, digressive, and self-contradictory novel, Ooka attempts to capture the historical and psychological complexities of Japanese culture during and after World War II by creating an unstable narrative that dissolves distinctions between victim and perpetrator, confession and self-evasion, animal and angel. Though acts of wartime cannibalism are part of the historical record, *Fires on the Plain* exploits the metaphorical aspects of cannibalism in order to reveal the irreconcilable tensions not only within the Japanese imperialist project but also within any individual at odds with his society. Private Tamura's inability to resolve his own double nature as subject responsible for his actions and object controlled by outside forces leads to a complete psychotic break; he can only live with himself by denying who he is and what he is done. Given Ooka's later claim that Tamura had not actually eaten human flesh, however, the larger point may be an admission that false consciousness is a type of defence mechanism through which both the individual and the society that produces him are able to deny the cannibalistic, self-consuming nature of human existence. Such denial, Ooka implies, may have been a necessary step certainly for Japanese society to move forward after World War II and possibly indispensable in order to survive with sanity intact at all.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Editor's note: References to page numbers (xxx) only throughout are to (Ooka, 2001), as per the references.