

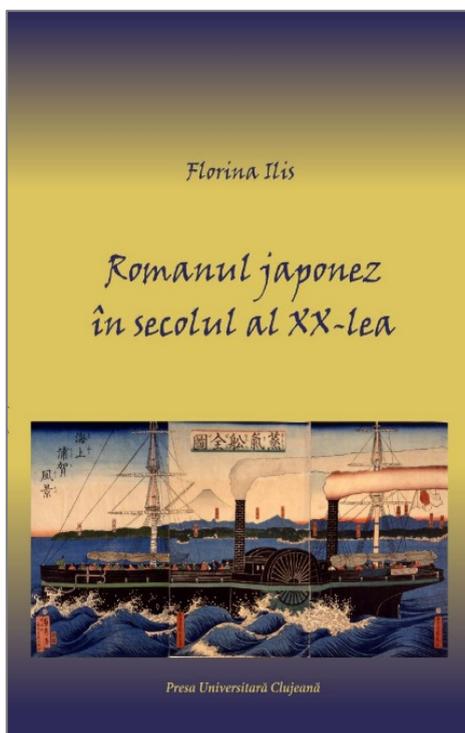
BOOKS

Florina Ilis, *Romanul japonez în secolul al XX-lea [The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century]*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2022, 225 p.

In recent years, a continuous interest for Japanese culture, language, values and literature can be noticed in the West, including in Romania. With numerous Japanese writers becoming the favourite authors of numerous people, a desire to understand Japanese literature on a deeper level can be felt. The volume *The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century* comes as a response to the need for exploring the development of Japanese literature,

as it provides the readers with all the necessary information on the literary trends and their progress in the 20th century.

The author wants not only to provide an outlook of the literary tendencies of the time, but also to understand them to their very core and provide the necessary tools to visualise the big picture and the various factors which led to the changes.



The author manages to provide a deep, intricate background for the literary works analysed, which aids the reader in understanding a culture different from theirs.

The volume follows multiple evolutionary threads: cultural, social and political, and manages to create a systematic analysis of them and their influence on the way literature was perceived and created. In order to illustrate the main directions of thought of the 20th century, the authors and the novels discussed in

the volume have been carefully selected, offering a clear image of the 20th century literary scene.

The first chapter (*Către o nouă ordine socială. Tradiționalism vs. Occidentalizare. [Towards a New Social Order. Traditionalism vs. Westernization]*) highlights a very important period, not only for literature, but for Japanese history

and society altogether. The chapter pays special attention to the social and cultural events that led to the development and shift in the literary scene, as these events are the catalyst that set in motion the literary perspective of the 20th century. Focusing on the changes of the Meiji era (1868 – 1912), the chapter explores the works of three famous writers: Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki and Enchi Fumiko, each having a subchapter dedicated to their craft. In order to help the reader understand the complex phenomena of the Meiji era and how the conflict between modernity and tradition influenced the works of the three authors, the first subchapter (*O nouă ordine socială? Contextul literar [A New Social Order? The Literary Context]*) provides the historical, cultural, political and social background of the main events and changes that the Meiji era brought. In order to properly highlight the importance of the Meiji transformations, Florina Ilis starts the subchapter with the context of Tokugawa or Edo era (1603-1868) and its “strict social hierarchy” (29), an era in which Japan had little contact with foreign countries. As shortcomings of Tokugawa’s system (such as deepening social differences or maintaining feudal relationships) started to become more and more noticeable, in the new Meiji era the focus shifted towards modernisation, as “the idea of modernisation was almost synonymous with the idea of civilization” (32). While some were welcoming the new changes, others were reticent, seeing the benefits of the old, traditional ways. This clash of views gave rise to a complex dialogue between new and old, modern and traditional, that could be noticed on all levels of culture, including in literature. Florina Ilis provides the readers with some of the most important

figures (such as Fukuzawa Yukichi) and their beliefs, as well as reforms from the period, but also with scholars who, under Western influences, started seeing the literary novel from a new perspective, such as Tsubouchi Shōyō, helping to shift the view towards the inner life and feelings of the characters (under the influence of the European realist novel). These new perspectives opened the path to innovation for writers like Mori Ōgai or Natsume Sōseki, later discussed in the chapter. One last important historical element explained in the subchapter is the end of the Meiji era, a period that deepened the discourse of the benefits and shortcomings of modernity and tradition. The Meiji era ended with Emperor Meiji’s death, followed shortly by the suicide of General Nogi Maresuke, who committed *junshi*, a type of voluntary death in which one follows their master in death. A gesture of loyalty difficult to understand for foreigners, Florina Ilis explains clearly and in an easy-to-understand manner the meaning of the general’s deed for the Japanese people and why it may seem inexplicable to the Western public. Seen as a gesture that reminded people of the importance of the traditional values in an era of rapid modernisation, the dilemma of tradition and modernity grew stronger, these events and their consequences being reflected in the literature of the time.

Successfully managing to explain the complex socio-historical changes of the Meiji era and how these influenced the Japanese mentality, the volume *The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century* continues to further analyse in the upcoming subchapters how these phenomena were reflected in literature. The next three subchapters focus on three important authors of the time: Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki and Enchi

Fumiko. In the second subchapter (*Mori Ōgai*), Mori Ōgai is highlighted as one of the adepts of modernisation through his novels, being influenced by the European Naturalism literary movement. However, after Emperor Meiji's death, Mori Ōgai's style changed drastically, giving up on his consecrated style and his "vaguely romantic thematic" (46) in favour of a literature that is inspired by historical facts, problematizing the clash between two different mentalities. Influenced by General Nogi's *junshi*, Ōgai wrote several works themed around voluntary ritualic death and its implications and meanings, the Japanese writer using the historical context to shed light on the relationship between the past and the present, and ultimately balancing the traditional Japanese education and Western thought. Florina Ilis proceeds to present in the third subchapter (*Natsume Sōseki*) another Japanese author who was also preoccupied with the difference between modernity and tradition, as "Natsume Sōseki's whole work can be understood as a sign of this oscillation between modernization and tradition" (60). The subchapter brings forth not only his literary works, but also his theoretical texts, analysing the state of literature and its directions. An in-depth analysis of the novel *I Am a Cat* presents to the readers not only the plot of the book, but also the way in which Sōseki cast a unique light upon the society he lived in, subtly underscoring the issue of traditional literature in contrast with modern literature. Through the analysis of the novel *Kokoro*, the subchapter rekindles the issue of General Nogi's death, Florina Ilis managing to capture in a concise manner the differences between Mori Ōgai's and Natsume Sōseki's vision. Although *Kokoro* was written under the influence of General

Nogi's *junshi*, the novel is not a historical one, but rather one that reframes concomitantly the state of society at the time, as well as the issue of individuality and the self. The last subchapter (*Enchi Fumiko*) presents Japan's modernisation from a new perspective: the issue of femininity in a modern society in which patriarchal values were just as important as in the traditional society. The thorough analysis of the novel *The Waiting Years* reveals that although the Meiji era was one of modernisation, the social system remained fundamentally unchanged, with women living difficult lives in a society of patriarchal privileges. The novel *Masks* is examined through parallels with *nō* theatre, the subchapter explaining essential theatre elements that support the readers in understanding Enchi Fumiko's multi-layered novel and the complex mentality of the feminine characters. Through the last subchapter, the chapter *Towards a New Social Order. Traditionalism vs Westernization* manages to give an elaborate explanation of the Meiji era and reflect the struggles of its modernisation process in novels from three different authors (Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki and Enchi Fumiko), therefore providing the public with three different perspectives on the issue of modernisation and tradition.

Similar to the first chapter, the second chapter (*Către o nouă ordine literară. [Towards a New Literary Order]*) presents the social and cultural context of the era (the end of Meiji era and the Taishō era [1912-1945]), before going in-depth about the most important authors of the time and their works. Florina Ilis masterfully explains the shift from novels that depict the social context, towards novels focused on the self (*shi-shōsetsu*), having an intimate outlook on the thoughts and

feelings of the characters. In order to illustrate these changes, in the upcoming chapters, the vision of Nagai Kafū, Dazai Osamu, Abe Kōbō, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Kawabata Yasunari are analysed. In the first subchapter (*Nagai Kafū*), Nagai Kafū's relationship with *shi-shōsetsu* is discussed through his work, particularly within *Something Strange Across the River*, in which the relationship between narrator-author-protagonist takes a unique form, as the boundaries between the three are difficult to distinguish. The novel focuses on the inner world of the protagonist, depicting a nostalgic Edo (former Tokyo) within the fast-changing country. The second subchapter (*Dazai Osamu*) depicts how *shi-shōsetsu* was further developed by Dazai Osamu, who went beyond its properties, by creating an "authentic literature, without construction artifices or stylistic flourishes" (124). However, Florina Ilis's analysis of Dazai Osamu's style goes further than his contribution to the new writing genre, highlighting the way he constructs his characters and how his personal style evolved. Further developing the post-war literary scene, the third subchapter (*Abe Kōbō*) presents Abe Kōbō's work, defined by the exploration of the theme of freedom, particularly in relation to a strict system. A new perspective is shed upon the literature of the time through the analysis of *The Woman in the Dunes*, a novel that managed to convey a political and a social message at the same time, relating the issues of the time and feelings of ordinary people. A new facet of the literary genre is shed through the works of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Yasunari Kawabata, as these are defined by a delicate aesthetic sense. The fourth subchapter (*Tanizaki Jun'ichirō*) proves that through

his works, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō managed to see through an aesthetic lens everyday life and its peculiarities, as he explored "from an aesthetic point of view the possibilities of art to express even the most unusual situations" (146). The theme of *beauty* and aesthetics is also predominantly used in Yasunari Kawabata's works, as the last subchapter (*Yasunari Kawabata*) indicates. Through the analysis of *The Sound of the Mountain* and *Snow Country*, the last subchapter analyses the connection between the modern man and everything around him, including his relationship with nature. Although the volume depicts the literary scene of the 20th century, Florina Ilis manages to create for the readers an intricate image of Japanese literature, from its beginnings to the 20th century. In doing so, she analyses the novel *The Sound of the Mountain* through a parallel of one of its chapters with one of the episodes of *The Tale of Genji*, written in the Heian era (794-1185), illustrating the continuity and the links between different literary genres.

The third chapter (*Noua ordine politică [The New Political Order]*) starts with a description of the post-war society and the discourse of what made the Japanese people unique, a discourse known as *nihonjinron*. The complex events that followed the Second World War and their effect on the Japanese society and mentality are further developed in the first subchapter (*Mishima Yukio*), where the analysis of the author's works is mixed with an analysis of Mishima Yukio's convoluted life and strong political views. This approach offers the public a better understanding not only of the way in which Mishima's novels are constructed, but also of his tragic death. Florina Ilis carefully parallels events from the author's life

with how they influenced his writing and literary views, offering a multifaceted perspective of the novel *Confessions of a Mask* and the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*. The last subchapter (*Ōe Kenzaburō*) illustrates a new perspective on the political situation of the country. If Mishima Yukio was devoted to militarist discourse, Ōe Kenzaburō is situated on the opposite side of the spectrum, critiquing the militarist politics from the Second World War. As a result, his works may prove uncomfortable for the readers, as they directly approach controversial or taboo topics. The subchapter analyses the novel *A Personal Matter*, observing the way in which society and the characters react to the birth of the protagonist's son, who was born with a brain malformation. Ōe's works prove to tackle sensitive topics without any reservations and illustrate human nature at its lowest points: "the authenticity preached by Ōe renders the humanity in man precisely when he criticizes him and represents him in the lowest degradation point" (191).

The last chapter (*Noua ordine mondială. Postmodernismul [The New World Order. Postmodernism]*) depicts the need to re-evaluate the past, analysing the merits and the shortcomings of modernism. Under the *retrospective* thought, a need to recover the links with the 19th century and to readjust the balance with modernity was felt throughout different areas of culture. In the case of literature, Florina Ilis identifies and later analyses two different attitudes: *soft postmodernism* (the oscillation between reality and the imaginary, that manages to bring forth the "fragility of the world" [195]) and *hard postmodernism* (which approaches difficult themes, such as violence, sex, alcohol, etc.). For each type of postmodernism, the volume

analyses a representative author, further elaborating on the characteristics of the two. Therefore, the first subchapter (*Postmodernismul soft. Murakami Haruki [Soft Postmodernism. Murakami Haruki]*) analyses the way in which Murakami Haruki manages to "solve the crisis of the self through fiction or through the fictionalisation of a world already fictionalised through media discourse" (203), creating works in which the real and fictional world interact and intertwine. The subchapter explains not only the literary style of Murakami, but also his popularity and what sets him apart from his contemporaries (Ōe Kenzaburō and Murakami Ryū), thoroughly presenting the Japanese author's view on globalisation and analysing his writing style, accused of resembling direct translation from English, rather than Japanese prose. *Hard postmodernism* is analysed in the last subchapter (*Postmodernismul hard. Murakami Ryū [Hard Postmodernism. Murakami Ryū]*), through the novel *Coin Locker Babies*, which explores heavy themes, such as violence, sex, homicide or drugs, within the story of two children who have been abandoned in a coin locker. The subchapter offers a clear image of the way in which a text can create different worlds, while explaining and exploring the inner and outer struggles of the two protagonists. Through clear analysis and thorough explanations, Florina Ilis manages to end the subchapter—and the volume—by offering a consistent view on postmodernism and its implications.

Through its intricate presentation of Japanese literature in the 20th century, the volume *The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century* paints an elaborate image of not only the literary scene, but also the historical, cultural and social events of the

time. Florina Ilis creates a historical foundation on which the literary arguments are built, helping the reader understand complex phenomena, different from the Western culture and, therefore, at times difficult to understand.

In the volume, Florina Ilis engages in a constant dialogue with numerous other literary critics, explaining their perspectives and bringing new arguments to their discourse. By doing so, she offers the readers a complete overview of the literary works discussed and the way they have been perceived by both Japanese literary critics and foreign literary critics. This makes *The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century* a suitable book for a wide audi-

ence, from Japanese language and literature students (to whom the author dedicates the volume), and literary critics or experts, to anyone interested in Japanese culture, literature, or history.

The volume *The Japanese Novel in the 20th Century* is remarkable not only through its literary analysis, but also through its storytelling, painting the cultural, social and politic image of Japan in the 20th century. In doing so, a clear, complete image of the literary currents and tendencies is painted against the background of the main events of the time. The volume is a valuable study on a fundamental period in Japanese history and literature, bringing close to the Romanian public an exotic, fascinating culture.

IOANA-CILIANA TUDORICĂ

*PhD Student, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
ciliana.tudorica@gmail.com*