

Image of “the Creole mother” and Lafcadio Hearn’s *Youma*

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Mesdames et messieurs, je suis très heureuse de pouvoir venir du Japon à la Martinique, mais je vous prie de m’excuser de parler anglais.

In Japan, the name of Lafcadio Hearn is best known through his re-told Japanese legends and folktales. Even children and people who know nothing about the author, are familiar with his stories.

Lafcadio Hearn, who was born in Greece, who grew up in Ireland, and later worked for a newspaper in the United States, came to Japan at the age of forty. Before that, he had spent two full years in Martinique where he had written two books : *Two Years in the French West Indies* which mainly consists of travel sketches and a novel, *Youma*. Hearn stayed in Japan for the rest of his life, and in these last fourteen years, besides teaching English literature, he published fourteen books on Japan.

The first of those books, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* is a wonderful sketch of life in the country in the late nineteenth century. He also wrote heart-warming essays that are excellent studies of the inner life of the Japanese people.

But the most widely read book of his , is his last one, *Kwaidan*, of which the title means weird tales. It is a collection of strange folktales from Japan, and was published in 1904, the year of his death.

One important feature that should be noted about his Japanese re-told tales is that the folktales were not just translated into English. They were “re-told”, which means Hearn modified the original Japanese tales. As a result, the tales became more than just an introduction of exotic folklore

to Western readers, and his re-told Japanese legends undoubtedly form a very unique accomplishment in literature.

Now, my point of interest lies in his stay in Martinique before he came to Japan. That is, the relevance of Martinique to Japan in the life and works of Hearn. In other words, what did Hearn discover in Martinique, moreover in Creole culture, that was to bear an important meaning for himself and to prepare his later works in Japan? I believe one answer will be found in his novel *Youma*, especially in the inspiring way the heroine is depicted as a Creole mother.

Of course, it is quite well known that Lafcadio Hearn had a life-long yearning towards his Greek mother, from whom he was separated as a small child. Even his interests in foreign cultures and folklore, his settling in Japan and being married into a traditional Japanese family, may in a way be explained by his mother-sickness. The theme and image of the eternal “mother” therefore can be detected throughout his writings, from the newspaper columns of his American days to the re-told Japanese stories of his last years in Tokyo.

However, the way the mother theme appears in his novel *Youma* has an outstanding feature that is not only impressive in itself but is also deeply related to the meaning of his re-told Japanese stories.

Today, I would like to point out the details and the significant character of “the Creole mother” depicted in *Youma*, as well as the fundamental meaning embodied in the mother-child relationship there. This should also make clear what values Hearn saw in Creole culture.

Now, the novel *Youma* begins with the well-known passage about the “da”, the nurse, in Martinique households; how the da cared for the child, and how she was loved and respected in return.

The heroine *Youma*’s mother was a da for a daughter of the Perronets, and when the daughter got married, *Youma* went along with her, and be-

came the da for the daughter’s baby child, Mayotte.

The story about their life in the plantation and Youma’s love with a fellow slave Gabriel follows. However, a riot breaks out and the novel ends with the famous climax scene, in which Youma, refusing Gabriel’s offer to save her, chooses to die with the infant, Mayotte, in a house surrounded and set fire to, by the angry mob. In this last scene, Youma holds the child in her arms, and Youma’s calm beauty is described as resembling a picture of the “Notre Dame du Bon Port” Holy Virgin and Child.

Thus the novel *Youma* begins with the da and ends with the Holy Mother, both descriptions relating to motherhood. In other words, we may say that Lafcadio Hearn was, in this early attempt to create a work of literature, very much concerned with the theme of the mother, and had embodied within the figure of Youma certain qualities that were vital matters to Hearn himself.

Then, what are those qualities that characterize the heroine, Youma ? Well, since the last scene of death is so dramatic and impressive, many might point out the strong self-sacrificing love of Youma towards the child. Youma is brave and mentally strong, and she protects the child to the last minute in a desperate situation surrounded by enemies. So, I think it is quite natural to see in Youma, an idealized motherhood, with a firm, self-sacrificing, absolute love, because this was just the type of mother Hearn himself never had in his life.

However, I believe that more significant attributes of Youma as a mother appear in two other aspects.

One is that Youma is involved with the encounter of two different cultures. The second is that Youma is a story-teller of Creole folktales.

So let us take a closer look.

The story of *Youma* is set in the background of a Creole society. Youma, a capresse, is a “da”, but since Mayotte’s white mother had died

young and had left Mayotte in Youma’s hands, Youma has become, so-to-say, practically the only mother of the child.

As is known, Hearn had based the novel on a historical event, and there was a model for Youma. According to relevant memoirs⁽¹⁾, the climax scene really happened that way. But one thing was different. The real mother of the child was alive and had stayed close together with the child and the original da.

In writing the novel, Hearn had changed the circumstances surrounding the child. That is, he had removed the real mother, the white mother from the scene. And here we recognize what Hearn had wanted to emphasize: the foster mother representing a different culture.

Youma and Mayotte each originally come from a different part of the Creole society. We may therefore say that they each belong to different cultures, with a different cultural heritage. Youma becoming the foster mother of Mayotte, would then mean an encounter of the two different cultures. And, what I think should be noted here, is that, in their mother and child relationship and more significantly in each of their own selves, the encounter of cultures operates as a factor that is both positive and negative. It is a factor that enriches and combines, but, at the same time, separates and alienates .

This becomes clearer if we shift the focus to the child.

When Mayotte’s mother dies and Youma becomes her substitute mother, they leave the town and go to live in a plantation by the sea. Hearn vividly depicts the long ride from the town over the mountains and to the seaside. And here, a completely new world is open to the child. Youma leads and initiates the child into a world of tropical sun and vegetation, of sugar cane fields, of everyday work and joy in the plantation. Hearn writes that, “there, in charge of Youma, the child began to gain strength”⁽²⁾. The child, as if she has obtained a new life, is no more a weak and fragile girl like her dead mother. In other words, Mayotte is

healed by the adoptive mother who belongs to another culture and thus, is connected to her.

But once the child is involved with both domains, the co-existence of two cultures within her start to have an alienating effect as well.

One episode shows symbolically, how Mayotte feels separated from the world.

In the morning Youma usually took Mayotte to the river to bathe.....but during the heat of the day, the child was permitted to view the wonder-world of the plantation only from the verandas of the house;.....all the sights and odors and sounds of plantation life filled her with longing to be out amidst them. What tantalized her most was the spectacle of the slave children playing on the grass plot and about the buildings, playing funny games in which she longed to join.

“I wish I was a little negress,” she said one day, as she watched them from the porch.

“You are a negress, da — or nearly the same thing — You are beautiful, da; you look like chocolate.”

“Is it not much prettier to look like cream ?”

“No: I like chocolate better than cream.”⁽³⁾

Here, Mayotte is frustrated because she feels dissociated from Youma’s world, from the world Youma had led her into. And she is here caught for the first time with an uncertainty about her own being, a feeling of doubt as to where she really belongs.

And the most interesting thing here in this novel, is that the anxiety and fears of Mayotte, which might, in a way, be regarded as a kind of an identity crisis, are dissolved and overcome by Youma’s narration of Creole folktales.

By the way, I would just like to mention the fact that, this uncertainty about one’s being can also be seen on Youma’s part as well. Youma, who was a capresse, and in Hearn’s words, “a type of the beauty of the mixed race”⁽⁴⁾, was brought up as the foster-child of her mistress because her own mother also had died young. That means she was brought up under similar conditions as Mayotte, and the fact that the two in a way reflect each other gives the novel depth and a wider range of meanings.

However, I will not go further into this matter now. I would just like to draw your attention to how Youma and Mayotte are united in a space that is created by the narration of folktales.

Now, we know, ofcourse, that Hearn had a folkloristic interest towards the folktales, customs and religious beliefs of the district when trying to understand a foreign culture. One of the main attractive assets of his writings is the folklore he effectively introduces, as we can see, for example, in *Two years in the French West Indies*.

However, in *Youma*, he puts more emphasis on the manner in which a folktale is told. He observes and describes the circumstances, the surroundings, and most important, the effects of narrating a folktale in the Creole world.

In the episode of Mayotte we just read, she says, in the last lines,

“No: I like chocolate better than cream....tell me a story, da.”⁽⁵⁾

Mayotte declares that she still wants to be a “chocolate”, but after that there is a pause. She is silent for a while, appearing to contemplate. And then, in a lighter tone, as if she has come to realize what she needs, she asks Youma to tell her a story.

Hearn writes, as we see in the next line, that “it was the only way to keep her quiet”⁽⁵⁾ when Mayotte was upset about herself. Hearn then introduces the titles and the outlines of the various folktales that Youma

would narrate for Mayotte, and he describes the effect on Mayotte as follows:

These tales at least enhanced and colored all her other pleasures—spreading about reality an atmosphere deliciously unreal—imparting a fantastic personality to lifeless things—filling the shadows with zombis—giving speech to shrubs and trees and stones...even the canes talked to her. chououa—chououa, like old whispering Babo, the libre—de—savane.

Each habitant of the plantation, from the smallest black child to tall Gabriel, realized for her some figure of the contes; and each spot of hill or shore or ravine visited in her morning walks with Youma, furnished her with the scenery for some impossible episode.⁽⁶⁾

Hearn is here saying that, the stories Youma narrated gave life and gave a meaning to the trees, the stones, the shadows, the black children in the plantation: in other words, all the things that Mayotte saw in the surrounding world. Thus, the alienating gap she had felt between herself and the world, disappears. After listening to the stories, Mayotte feels connected closely again to Youma.

And I believe one of the most impressive scenes in this novel, is the following passage in which Hearn depicts in a wider perspective, the whole atmosphere that extends over the moment of narrating a folktale.

It was at Anse Marine that Youma found most of the tales she recounted to Mayotte, when the child became old enough to take delight in them.

So the life had been in the valley plantation for a hundred years, with little varying. Doubtless there were shadows in it, sorrows which never found utterance, happenings that never had mention in the verses

of any chanelle, days without song or laughter, when the fields were silent.

But the tropic sun ever flooded it with dazzling color; and great moons made rose-light over it; and always, always, out of the purple vastness of the sea, a mighty breath blew pure and warm upon it — the breath of the winds that are called unchanging: les Vents Alizés.⁽⁷⁾

The dominating elements of this beautiful scene are: the dazzling sun and the great moon, the vastness of the sea and the breath of the winds, the unchanging hours and the presiding tranquility of the scenery.

Here we do not see anything of the weird and frightening aspects of nature in the tropics, especially that of the tropical forest, which Hearn often referred to in other writings about Martinique, such as *Two years in the French West Indies*.

The scene depicted here gives one the impression of something more like a visionary landscape that would appear, for example, in a myth or a dream, rather than a real description of some specific place in Martinique.

However, the lucid atmosphere of this setting is a characteristic that repeatedly appears in his writings. It could already be noticed in the poetic scenery of the sea depicted in *Chita*. It also recurs in Japan, in an essay called “The Dream of a Summer Day”, where he writes about “the memory of a place and a magical time in which the Sun and the Moon were larger and brighter than now.” and where “the sea was alive”, and the Wind full of joy.⁽⁸⁾ So, you may say that this basic image of scenery was deeply rooted in Hearn’s mind .

And the more significant features that mark the scene in *Youma* are that this lucent scene of the sun, the moon and the sea is depicted first as a symbolic space that embraces the mother and child after folktales are narrated, and secondly, as a scene that overlaps the severe reality of life.

Behind them in the background, lies reality, where there are shadows and sorrows, silence and oblivion, anxieties and fears. But Youma and Mayotte, narrating folktales, are enfolded by a vast expanse of mythical serenity and brightness. And here, the foster mother and child are united into one.

And, if we now recall the final climax scene, in which Youma dies with the child, we will notice that it has the same symbolic structure we have already seen.

Against a background of blazing flames, with people screaming in terror, Youma and Mayotte appear by the window. The rioting slaves had offered to save Youma, but without the child. For Mayotte, this was a separating force from outside, coming from the different world that Youma belonged to. And it was far stronger than any sense of alienation Mayotte had felt before. Youma rejects the offer, and Hearn writes,

Her eyes were bent upon the blond head hiding against her breast; her lips moved; she was speaking to the child;...Little Mayotte looked up into the dark, beautiful face.....Youma then began to caress her with calm tenderness, murmuring to her, all placidly, as though lulling her to sleep. Never in Gabriel’s eyes had Youma seemed so beautiful.⁽⁹⁾

We see in the core of this final scene of death, Youma speaking tenderly to the child, as if telling a story, perhaps, one of her favorite folktales. And we understand that here also, it is the power of Youma’s narration, that soothes Mayotte’s fear, and thus enfolds the two in a serene holiness.

I have so far tried to explicate, how, in the novel *Youma*, the story telling of folktales by the mother, functions to dissolve any feeling of separation or alienation between the child and the world the foster mother

represents, which we may term, as negative effects caused by the encounter of different cultures.

Then, why so ? we may ask. In what way should the narration of folktales have the power that connects and unites ?

I believe we can find the answer in the following passage, where Hearn analyzes the uniqueness of Creole folklore.

And furthermore, in these contes créoles, whether of purely African origin or merely African adaptation of old-world folklore and fable, the local color is marvelous: there is such a reflection of colonial thought and life as no translation can preserve. The scenes are laid among West Indian woods and hills, or sometimes in the quaintest quarter of an old colonial port...⁽¹⁰⁾

Hearn continues and refers to more examples: that the European cottage becomes the tropical bamboo hut, that sleeping beauties are discovered in the primeval forests by runaway slaves, that the Cinderellas and Princesses become beautiful half-breed girls in Creole costume, that Bluebeards and giants become sorcerers and devils, and so on and on.

It seems that Hearn was so fascinated by the creole folktales that he simply could not help listing up all the examples he knew. And we should note that it was apparently the unique Creole adaptation of European and African stories that Hearn was deeply impressed by.

In the Creole folktales of Martinique, the imagination of the people has taken in stories that have come from a different culture and by modifying them, turned them into tales of their own.

In other words, Hearn must have seen here in the Creole folktales a type of narration, in which as a result, different cultures merge together and reflect a unity in the encounter of different worlds. I am sure this was at least one of the values that Hearn had recognized in Creole culture.

And what I find most interesting is that this was just the type of narration that he accomplished later in Japan. As I have already mentioned in the beginning, the important and attractive feature of Hearn’s retold Japanese tales, is that he had modified the original Japanese tale, and thus had made it into a unique work of literature, in which we can see two different literary traditions meet, that of the East and that of the West.

In the novel *Youma*, when the mother narrates Creole folktales to the child, she is in fact narrating retold stories that have unifying effect on the recipient as well. We may say, that Hearn had discovered and embodied the values of re-told literature he was to accomplish later in Japan, in the image of the Creole mother in *Youma*.

That is why I find this novel, and the figure of Youma so interesting.
Merci beaucoup pour votre attention.

Notes:

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- (1) Adeline de Reynal, “Youma”, *Centenaire du Passage de Lafcadio Hearn aux Antilles : Regards sur un écrivain à la découverte de la Martinique*, Edition du Centre d’Art Musée Paul Gauguin, Carbet, 1987.
- (2) *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, vol. 4, Boston, Houghton & Mifflin, 1922. p. 273
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 285-286
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 268
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 286
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 287
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 284
- (8) *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, vol. 7 (*Out of the East*), p. 17
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 370
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 283