

## Insularity in the Literary Imagination of SHIMAO Toshio

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### Abstract

One of the most original authors in post-war Japanese literature, SHIMAO Toshio (1917-1986) is known not only for his military career (he was an officer on a ‘suicide boat’ at the end of the WWII) but also for his insightful ideas regarding the Japanese archipelago, which he named ‘*Japonesia*’ in the 1960s. His idea, which was to situate Japan on the edge of the chained islands loosely extending from Polynesia via Indonesia, the Philippines, and Taiwan, is now recognized as essential to East Asian cross-border area studies. However, the question of how ‘archipelagianess’ functions in SHIMAO’s literary writings has not been studied satisfactorily in the current body of literature. In my paper, I try to identify some insular imagery in his novels and further discuss the metaphors and meanings that the imagery suggests to the reader.

**Keywords:** insularity, islandology, Japanese literature, SHIMAO Toshio

A radical overhaul of Japanese literature began soon after WWII. In the latter half of the 1940s, a number of young authors began to publish their works: these successive groups of writers are called ‘the first post-war school’ and ‘the second post-war school’. The latter is especially known for its European-style novels, which won high appreciation abroad; this group includes the writers MISHIMA Yukio and ABE Kôbô. SHIMAO Toshio is sometimes considered as one of these post-war authors, although he is often also regarded as an important figure of the following generation, called ‘the third freshmen, who became prominent in the first half of the 1950s. The lightness of this name implies the tendency of these authors to describe their daily lives and personal stories without revealing an explicit political consciousness. However, their literary freshness has gradually won popularity and high regard, and they are now recognized as among the most important authors in modern Japanese literature.

SHIMAO Toshio was born in Yokohama and grew up in Kôbe and Nagasaki. In 1944, having graduated from Kyûshû Imperial University, he was immediately drafted into the navy as a ‘student on a torpedo boat’ — that is, a naval bomb boat. After a short period of training, he was sent to Amami archipelago in the Kagoshima Prefecture as an officer in a naval suicide-attack squadron. On a small island called Kakeroma, he received an order to prepare

himself for departure, but he was never given the final order to attack. The war ended, and, miraculously, he survived. These wartime experiences later became major themes in his literary works.

After the war, SHIMAO married a woman whom he had met on the island and returned to mainland Japan. Shortly thereafter, he began to publish his auto-fictional short stories. In 1954, his wife, Miho, became mentally ill, another event which became a major preoccupation in SHIMAO's writings. In 1955, SHIMAO moved with his family to the island of Amami-Oshima, where he lived for around twenty years.

During the time he spent in the Amami archipelago, SHIMAO developed a new vision of Japan as part of the long archipelago which leads to Taiwan through the Amami and Ryukyu islands. He named it '*Japonesia*', situating the Japanese archipelago on the edge of the chained islands extending loosely from Polynesia through Indonesia. The idea to decentralize Japan and to deconstruct its uniformity has been re-evaluated extensively, especially since the 1990s, in the East Asian cross-border area studies. However, how 'archipelagianess' or 'islandness' works in SHIMAO's literary writings has received very little attention.

The common characteristics of all of SHIMAO's auto-fictional stories on his wartime experiences is the protagonist's conviction that he is doomed and destined for an imminent death as a result of the suicide attack he will be ordered to commit. He only lives while the death order is suspended.

As the title of the short story *Shima no Hate* (The Farthest Edge of the Islands) suggests, Kakeroma Island, where the protagonist was sent at the end of the war, is conceived of as the edge of his world, the edge of his imagination. Situated just next to Amami-Oshima Island, Kakeroma Island is not really a lonely island: however, the protagonist does feel lonely and separated from the rest of the world. Beyond this edge, only death awaits him. SHIMAO's last novel, *Gyoraitai Gakusei* (A Student on the Torpedo Boat), describes his gradual journey towards the actual southern edge of the Japanese Empire: the protagonist is trained first in Yokosuka, then in Nagasaki, and finally sent to Amami archipelago. This approach to the edge implies also his approach towards the death (Fig. 1).

As the protagonist arrives at the edge, the island becomes a place which paralyses his sense of being alive. It is described as an isolated, closed space with a complicated contour. A typical example of such a description is already found in one of SHIMAO's earliest stories, *Shutsu-kotô-ki* (A Tale of Leaving a Lonely Island, 1949).

As the title indicates, the place is a 'lonely island', which means that the protagonist and his squadron can neither move ahead nor turn back. They are trapped and have a limited supply of food, so they have to cultivate food to eat. They continue to live a peculiar daily life, eating and excreting, able to determine nothing by themselves. Here they remain, waiting for the order to attack, the moment of their death. Their condition of being is in every sense absurd. The narrator keeps expressing his anxiety and apathy:

I'm now a soldier! How is this incompatible!?! What could I know about this war? My will was lost, my hands got dirty, I was running down on an inclination. (...) Blown off by the bloody starvation from the south, I was destined to jump off, not only by myself but also leading 48 suicide boats, the cliff of the frozen sea beyond the world.

(SHIMAO 1992, p.138)

We have finally come to this point only to wait for the order to depart.

Strangely, I have lost my ability to persist in this world. The minute-by-minute delay planted in me a seed of impatience. It was painful to retain, constantly, the mental readiness to immediately depart. Now is the chance. Now is the best time. If it is now, I can go out without hesitation.

(*Ibid.*, p.176)

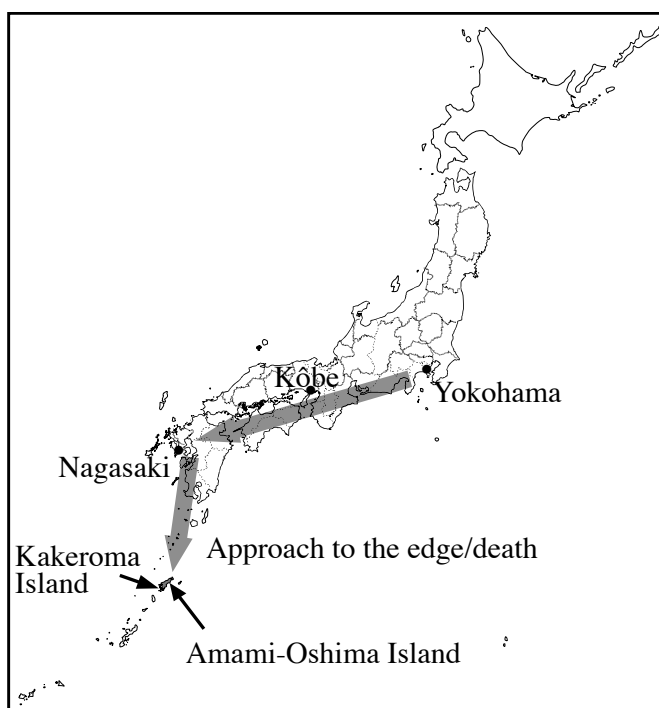


Fig. 1. *Gyoraitei Gakusei* (A Student on the Torpedo Boat) describing his gradual journey towards the actual southern edge of the Japanese Empire, which implies also his approach towards the death.

The scenery repeatedly described in the story is the inlet of the island, called 'Nomino-ura'. In this hidden, enclosed space, the protagonist prepares his suicide boat squadron, using the cliff and its caves to conceal the boats. The protagonist often wanders along the inlet and the cape, observing the tide coming in and going out. The eventless days and nights begin to wear on his nerves, and he is continually perplexed by the loss of his will to live. At last, he receives the order to prepare for attack, but the story ends without him receiving the final order. The main theme, the eternal delay of a nevertheless impending death, is metaphorically represented by the repeated, cyclic nature of his natural surroundings in the inlet.

I close this short paper with a quotation related to the inlet, which indicates a presentiment of rebirth.

In the freshness of the dawn, every inch of my body was liberated, flexible, absorbed in the enthralling relief that my fulfilled flesh still belonged to myself.

It is probably that our action will be delayed while the sun shines.

Then, the morning came naturally in the inlet, and its fresh impression soon, along with the sunrise, began to repeat its daytime routine.

Nothing happened.

(*Ibid.*, pp.186-7)

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