

**Prejudice, Justice and Love: in the reading of**  
***Snow Falling on Cedars***  
**by David Guterson**

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The novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson, is not only a meaningful drama of the courthouse, but also an excellent description of American society during and after WWII era: it is powerfully committed to engaging with the ideals of justice, law, love and human conscience. The dramatization of the novel is also successfully carried out into the beautiful film that was released from Universal Pictures. The film was highly praised as it captured the public attention.

Its eloquent description of the community in which the story took place was especially attractive to our innocent mind. The place is the fictional island of San Pedro off the coast of Washington and the time is 1954, eight years after the end of World War II, a war where many young men from the island volunteered to fight for America and freedom as well as justice. Some of them lost their lives. The protagonists of this novel, Carl Heine, Kabuo Miyamoto, and Ishmael Chambers, all three of them went to war and returned home being seriously wounded not only physically but also mentally.

Now one of those survivors— a gill-netter Carl Heine—has drowned under mysterious circumstances and another fisherman is on trial for his murder. The fact that the accused, Kabuo Miyamoto, is a second-generation Japanese-American is not mere coincidence. Among San Pedro's Anglos, hostility against Japanese was still running high. Most of white residents were by and large victims of racial prejudice. Certainly a murder trial has upset the quiet community and naturally this tranquil village has become the center of controversy.

In this paper I would like to argue if prejudice intervenes in justice and prevents a jury from passing a clear verdict, if love can help human consciences work effectively even in the midst of social estrangement, and what it is to govern an American system of justice under such circumstances.

Keywords : Prejudice, Justice, Racism, and love

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### About the story:



(from Widescreen, Universal)

The story begins with a gill-netter named Carl Heine who has drowned under mysterious circumstances. Regarding his death another fisherman is on trial for his murder. The accused was Kabuo Miyamoto, a second-generation Japanese American. Although it was eight years after WWII, hostility against Japanese was still running high among San Piedro's Anglos and other white residents. Most of them are victims of the racism because they don't admit the fact that, like Kabuo, those Japanese born and raised on the island voluntarily went and joined to the war and fought for the United States only to show their loyalty by risking their lives .

The novel consists of 32 chapters. Although the story doesn't flow as the chronological time goes, it does reveal in the narration the shadows of human beings' dark side as well as its undeniable positive attitudes toward social justice.

The story begins in the winter of 1954 with the trial of Kabuo Miyamoto, a Japanese-American boy who faces the charge of murder in the death of Carl Heine who is of German descendant. The trial occurs in the Island County Courthouse located in Amity Harbor, the only town on the island. Out-of-town newspapermen flock into the courtroom to cover the trial, and Ishmael Chamber, a local newspaperman, was also there. When the trial begins, San Piedro was in the midst of a snowstorm, which continues throughout its course. The prosecutor Alvin Hooks looks at Kabuo's face; he thinks Kabuo's face was unreadable as he contemplates the snow falling over the cedars. Kabuo thinks of the scene in the window as "infinitely beautiful", largely because the basement cell in which he had been imprisoned for seventy-six days was windowless.

As the trial progresses and odds weigh against Kabuo, whose innocence however we readers don't realize yet until the novel comes to the ending, the narrative leads our attention to Ishmael, a young man who had been deeply in love with Hatsue, who is now a wife of Kabuo. Ishmael had never have come to terms with losing her love and now wears a broken heart. Despite his mother's words that Hatsue is now married to another man, Ishmael could not lose his boyhood dream which he shared with Hatsue. He lost his left arm in a battle with Japanese armies, which also signifies a loss of spirit.

Ishmael's character is further revealed through the narratives proceeds. He was inherited the characters of his father Arthur, who had founded the island newspaper. Arthur had been a good man, committed to the social good and an idealist. He spoke always of the responsibility of the island community to reject prejudice against its own residents. According to his mother's story Arthur loved humankind dearly and with all hearts, but he

disliked most human beings. The narrative shows that Ishmael followed his father's example and as a result his character is built and shown as partly a product of his families and their past experiences. The same could be said of Kabuo, too. He certainly inherited his *samurai* family lineage. So did Carl his mother's fastidiousness. And Hatsue, too, inherited her Japanese identity, although she once cried she didn't want to be a Japanese ; she without doubt suffered from ambivalence about her identity as a Japanese and as an American.

Before the war took place, his father Carl Senior had promised Kabuo's father to sell the seven acres of land for the strawberry farm. Landholding was their dream, which was in other words the "American Dream" to immigrants. But Kabuo's father could not hold the land by law because he wasn't a citizen. So he expected that when his son Kabuo reached the age of twenty, he, as a citizen, would hold the land he had bought from Carl senior. But the contract of theirs was not fulfilled when the war happened. Because of the forced relocation of Japanese, the final two payments became impossible, thus the contract had been breached. Mrs. Carl Senior sold the land to another man, which made Kabuo hate her and tension was created between these two families.

The narrative returns back to the scene when the accidents occurred. It was a black night in the dense fog when Carl's boat got trouble with its engine and could not run. Kabuo, fishing nearby, came to help. With Kabuo's help Carl junior managed to replace the battery with the new one which Kabuo offered. On his boat, that foggy dark night at sea, Carl suddenly referred to the case of land once they argued about. Carl proposed the contract and they reached an agreement that Carl would sell Kabuo the seven acres of the land for the strawberry field. After their reconciliation, a tragedy occurred; a giant freighter ship passed by leaving a wake large enough to upset a fishing boat. According to Ishmael's imagination, when Carl heard the fog-horn of the freighter, he, preparing for the wake, climbed quickly to take the lantern down with the fastidiousness he had inherited from his mother. But the action had been ill-timed, and the wall of water slammed into his boat. The top of the mast struck his head as he sank into the water and tangled in his own net; he was drowned in his fishing net. Carl's death was an accident, Ishmael thought.

### **About Prejudice:**

Once again the narrative returns to the courthouse. We see Kabuo telling the story on the witness stand. But the prosecutor reacts by pointing to his impassive expression, that is, his poker face, and says that it is not a face that can be trusted. This is one of the largest prejudices against Japanese, so the judge immediately admonished him for his prejudiced comment. In Japanese culture it is taught that you should maintain composure and stillness while the inner life may be chaotic and in turmoil. But Westerners tend to assume, on the other hand, that one can read a person's thoughts and emotions on the face. This is a crucial difference between Japanese culture and Western's. Cultural differences sometimes cause serious misunderstandings and prejudice which often leads to hostility ; I have read somewhere that one *nissei* ( which means the second generation of Japanese Americans) once said, after they were released from the forced relocation camps, that the victims of Executive Order 9066<sup>(1)</sup> were people whose "only crime was their face." Racism is definitely responsible for the relocation of Japanese Americans as much as responsible for hostility and prejudice which thrived in white American communities at that time.

In the courthouse the Japanese onlookers sat in the back of the room not because it was the law, but because they were socially compelled to sit there. It was clear that prejudice and suspicions thrived against the Japanese community there. Prejudice also drives the

individuals involved in piecing together the story of what happened to Carl Heine to unfairly target Kabuo, although the facts all told could show that the death was accident.

It was not the war alone that resulted in the relocation camps. Their existence blemished America's ideal of a "Just Society", demonstrating the country's prejudice against some of its own citizens. Like Kabuo, people suffering from the injustices of prejudice are --by definition-- not given the benefit of the doubt.

Prejudice also affect a person's interpretation of new information. The American government and American society generally during the war with respect to Japanese-Americans and the community of San Piedro Island, particularly at Kabuo's trial, face the question of whether a suspect is more likely to have a good or an evil nature. In each case, prejudice leads the judges to assume that the suspect is evil and to interpret data in line with that suspicion.

### **About Justice**

During the closing arguments, the prosecutor presents his version of the case and the defendant attorney offers another view. He, the defendant attorney, says that he has grown old and in facing death, he wants to share a few words: "What I see is again and again the same sad human frailty. We hate one another; we are victims of irrational fears. And there is nothing in the stream of human history to suggest we are going to change this." Now Ishmael recalls what he asked the jurors : he asked to put the war behind them, to set aside prejudice. When Ishmael considers the entire event of the trial in contrast to the snowstorm, the trial was a human affair, squarely in the arena of human responsibility, no mere accident of wind and sea but instead a thing humans could make sense of. Its progress, its impact, its outcome, its meaning – these were all in the hands of the people. If so, the legal system is within the control of human faculties, able to be guided by reason and fairness. Ishmael so concluded. However Hatsue claims that both the relocation and the trial were both unfair in the same way. She insists that a community has a particular responsibility to work for greater fairness. In living together, the community ought to have a stricter sense of justice. She cannot hold her sentiments and implores Ishmael to do something with the paper, to make it speak, to defend them in the way that his father would have done. She has almost lost her faith in the system of American justice while Ishmael still has a strong faith in American just.

### **American Dreams:**

I want to mention something about the American dream.

The American Dream was "the hope of political freedom and economic success". It has also inspired immigrants and their descendants for generations. This dream is illustrated in this novel, too, through the strawberry fields. Overlaid on this dream is the ideal of communal harmony, illustrated by the coming together of the Japanese community with the native islanders, and the Japanese girl who is chosen each year to be the Strawberry Princess. More directly, the American Dream takes the form of owning one's own strawberry farm and cultivating its wealth with one's own hands and with one's children. Both Kabuo and Hatsue share this dream, and Kabuo's father had arranged for the dream to take root during his lifetime. The war, however, with the relocation of Japanese Americans, destroyed that dream. At least Kabuo couldn't obtain the American Dream.

### **About cultural difference and love:**

In this novel, cultural differences are challenged by the possibility of a love that can transcend them. This theme is dramatically portrayed in the relationship between Ishmael and Hatsue. Ishmael, the blind idealist, sees nothing other than a future life with Hatsue. Hatsue, on the other hand, is plagued by the awkward feeling that loving Ishmael erases part of the Japanese heritage she prizes. In other words her personal American identity and her Japanese identity began to collide, but the circumstances require her to make a choice. Her mother's pressures strengthen the divide in her mind and reinforce the importance of maintaining her Japanese identity.

But Hatsue wonders "if identity was geography instead of blood, if living in a place was what mattered, then Ishmael was a part of her, inside of her, as much as anything Japanese." The point is that personal love and personal experience did not have to crowd out her cultural heritage, but the new wartime circumstance threatened the inherited part of Hatsue that, despite Ishmael's good intentions and "blind" idealism, it could never become a part of his own future.

The novel closes when the judge sentenced innocence of Kabuo. In the snowstorm, Hatsue rushed out of the courthouse to catch Ishmael and hugged him saying how much he was kind toward her and how much his last action helped Kabuo. What if he hadn't brought the new evidence about the accident into the courthouse?. It is Ishmael who helped not only the judge, the prosecutor, and the jurors, but also everybody from committing wrong judgments so that they could escape from racism and prejudice overcoming the differences of cultures. As the author says human heart is never fully known; it is a mystery.

Questions of judgment and moral conduct are also portrayed in this novel. And these questions center on the revelation of the truth. For the jury, their responsibility is to discern the truth, being ready to declare guilt only if the guilt seems clear beyond a "reasonable doubt". In other words, they must consider the evidence objectively, crediting the depth of each point of view. In discerning what they believe to be true, they pass judgment. In Kabuo's case, however, prejudice interfered with strict scrutiny of the evidence, and the jurors were more ready to pass judgment than to offer Kabuo the benefit of the doubt..

### **Conclusion:**

Words mean different things to each of us, especially where we don't share the same culture. Suppose you live in the mix of different cultures, you will notice how complicated it would be. But we know that it is also difficult to communicate in the same language, even in the same household; it is so easy to be misunderstood even by those whom we love most. Therefore we all know how difficult it is to communicate across cultures and in different languages. But as we get to know each other and like each other, we can start to trust each other. Communicating across our language and culture barriers becomes rewarding and fun. While I was reading the translation version of *The Snow Country* by Edward Seidensticker, I found in it another "Snow Country" which was different from Kawabata's original, even though the translation work was amazingly faithful to the original. I noticed, however, that the recognition and/or the description of the psychology of the protagonists were different, but intriguing and compelling to us. I also found many examples as such in reading those works by William Faulkner, especially *Light in August*, in which the recognition of black blood in Joe Christmas meant so much in the environment that his life had to take a doomed shape as he grew up. The significance of cultural, ethnical and even socio-political differences are so important and indispensable for mutual understanding between peoples who don't share same languages, culture and

ideals.

Here we have another example. When Shrieve, a Canadian youth, one of the heroes in *Absalom, Absalom*, asked Quentin what the South would be like, how the Southerners live there, he replied, "You don't know unless you live there." This suggests that how difficult it is to share mutual understanding even among people who use the same language. I know it is not easy to understand each other if we don't share same culture, language, and evaluation. But globalization will never slacken its process.

What I want to claim here is that comparative and critical reading of translation works of literature could be of great help for mutual understanding between peoples who have different cultures, political systems, ideals and moral evaluations.

I wonder if literature can serve to educate us so that eventually we can get better mutual understandings despite different social systems, ideals and cultures we share. After I have read the novel I recalled that famous phrase given by William Faulkner in his speech for the acceptance of the Nobel Prize: *man shall never die. Man only endures.*<sup>(2)</sup> So long as man can endure, we will never be beaten by the accidents as David Guterson, the author of this novel concludes his story : *Accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart.*

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#### Notes

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(1) Executive Order 9066 : In February 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9006, which empowered the government to remove "any and all" persons of Japanese ancestry from sensitive military areas in four western states. It was so quick that only few days were left for Japanese residents to evacuate. They were compelled to sell their land and businesses for a fraction of their value, or to lease them to neighbors who would later refuse to pay their rent. According to the documents which were recently declassified, it was revealed that the Japanese population at that time was never considered a serious threat to American security. Compared to the treatment of Japanese residents, neither Germans nor Italians living in this country were subject to similar restrictions at all ( from Internet: Reading Group Center).

(2) William Faulkner says: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." ( from Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Dec. 10, 1950)

#### Works cited:

David Guterson: *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Harcourt Brace and Company, New York 1994.