

**Introduction to World Literature**  
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**'In a Grove'**

Hello everyone, good morning and welcome to today's session of this course, where we would discuss a renowned and celebrated short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, titled 'In a Grove'. This was originally written in Japanese and it has been translated widely into almost all languages across the world. It is considered as the best known fiction piece as far as this field of world literature is concerned. Ryunosuke Akutagawa was a Japanese writer, he lived from 1892 till 1927.

He is quite rightfully considered as the father of Japanese short stories. In Japan, there is even a premier literary award named after Akutagawa work, it is known as the Akutagawa prize, so that is a kind of reputation, the literary reputation and stature that Akutagawa enjoys in Japanese literary tradition. He died very young, he committed suicide at the age of 35, but he still considered as the greatest of the Tianshu. Tianshu period is the period during which Emperor Tianshu ruled and more than it is considered as appealed of democracy and of flashing of popular culture, especially from 1910s till 1930s.

Akutagawa wrote mostly during these decades when the spirit of democracy and the spirit of popular culture was celebrated much. With perhaps even today when we read his works, they do have a they do have a contemporariness to it, they do not sound archaic, it is not far removed from the worlds that we are familiar with. There is a familiarity that we can find with most of Akutagawa's works. Many critics feel that it is of universal nature as well.

The short story that we propose to discuss today 'In a Grove', it was written in 1922 during the modernist period. The short story 'In a Grove's ' claim to fame also rests on the fact that at later point, Akira Kurosawa, he had made a movie version of this, that was in 1951 and the movie is the well-known world-renowned movie Rashomon. So, 'In a Grove' is a early modernist short story. It is in the form of a collection of testimonies. The story has been made deliberately ambiguous.

If you try to find out what exactly this is about and what is the truth value and what the meaning of the story exactly is, it, you may not be entirely successful. In this story we find 3 varying accounts of the murder of a samurai, Japanese warrior and it is about the examination of the distortion of the truth. We also have a multiple viewpoints through which the story gets

narrated. But at the same time, there are these 2 elements coming together. We have a traditional value system in place, there is also the notion of the role of honor in the samurai codes.

But these 2 are not necessarily celebrated in the short story, we will begin to see that. There is a way in which Akutagawa also tries to subvert some of the prevalent notions by not really being straightforward by not really being conventional in his attitude towards this narration. There are 7 sections in that short story, as you can see in this excerpt. The 7 sections are titled in a very matter-of-fact manner as, almost as often it is a part of legal document.

The 1st one is the testimony of a woodcutter questioned by a high police Commissioner. The 2nd one, the testimony of a travelling Buddhist priest questioned by high police Commissioner, then the testimony of a policeman question by a high police Commissioner, 4th one, the testimony of an old woman question by a high police Commissioner. Of the 7, these 4 sections are the testimonies of people who are not directly involved in this crime, which is the murder of a samurai, his corpse, his body has been found.

The next 3 sections are, the confession of a woman who has come to the Shimizu temple, that the story of the murdered man, as told through a medium and finally Tajomaru's confession. The last 3 testimonies, one of which is the story of the murdered man told by himself through a medium, the last 3 are narrated by people who have been involved in this murder directly or indirectly. What is particularly interesting about this short story is its mode of narration.

There are multiple narrators, there are 7 narrators to be precise and it is not in the form of a dialogue, we only get the sense that they are narrating this to a police High Commissioner who is questioning them. And we also get to know about the sense of audience over there. But there is no dialogue, there is no way to understand who else on the other side who is listened to this story always asking questions and we also do not get to know how the story has been interpreted. Who is the one who has edited this, the one who has scripted this, we have no way of knowing those things.

Through in all of these sections, in which we have multiple narrators, it is narrated through a 1st person narrator. But we also know that these are all unreliable narrators. Unreliable narrator was a term introduced by Wayne C Booth, in his Rhetoric of Fiction. The unreliable narrator, the presence of the unreliable narrator, the presence of the unreliable narrator also

tells us that we do not have an omniscient point of view, we do not have an omniscient narrator who seems to know everything.

Instead of that what we have here is a distant and objective narration. And in very matter-of-fact tone as the titles, the titles of different sections suggest, it is almost like a legal document. And each of these sections is framed in such a way that it almost appears like a police interview, we begin to notice, there are excuse given in the short story where we understand that the narrator is responding to particular questions. And what would lead challenges, the claim to any kind of truth value is the fact that every character ends up saying something that is refuted by another.

If you try to put this story together, if you try to come up with this larger story from the smaller sections, we begin to know that there are a number of inherent contradictions, sometimes trivial and sometimes grave and there is a way in which the story leaves this entire episode of this murder open-ended, by not allowing us to zero in on one truth version. And in these sections, through which the story is progressing, there is no interaction between the characters.

The interaction, if at all that these characters have is only with this police commissioner who is questioning them. And it is said that these narratives are termed as solo narratives, where they are only testifying. The characters are also not well round, they are not well formed and this is deliberately done. So they are mostly flat and one-dimensional characters, except for the mother, the woman who claims to be the mother of the missing girl, except for her, we do not find the characters even displaying any kind of emotions.

What Akutagawa has done in this story is not to spend more time flashing out the characters but to give us a lot of details about the context, about the physicality of the surroundings, so that from that we can perhaps begin to infer whether the characters are saying the truth or not, whether they are contradicting each other or not. Or more importantly just to introduce the reader also to this crime scene by giving us more details, but making us also one of the witnesses, making us also perhaps one of the narrators who are not part of this plot.

Let us try to get a closer look at the different narrators who are presented through these different sections. 1st one is the woodcutter, he is the one who had 1st found the body and he is a mere witness. But when we analyse the story and try to fit in the maybe as missing gaps and puzzles, we also begin to wonder whether he was the one who also stole the sword,

which was there in the body, in the samurai's body. And we have a travelling Buddhist priest who claims to have seen the couple and we do not have any other details, other than the fact that the Buddhist priest had merely seen them passing through.

But then there are these unanswered questions of what the Buddhist was doing there and about what the Buddhist priest was doing there and also his testimony, is not entirely reliable because he also has certain distorted views of good and evil. There is a policeman who boasts about having arrested Tajomaru because that was also a significant milestone in his career. We really do not know whether he had successfully overpowered Tajomaru or was whether it was just a mere accident, which led him to catch this bandit.

The old woman who claims to be Masago's mother, Masago is the missing girl, the wife of the man who is dead. And the old woman also identifies the dead man as Taka Hiro and that is the man who married her daughter. And she is the only one who displays some emotion during this process of narration, she breaks down, she comes across as being emotional. But we also find that she is being made to exaggerate certain things, such we will shortly see. And all of these people we find these people that they lie, primarily to bolster their egos.

And they are all motivated by self-interest and self-deception and that makes all of their testimonies suspect. The woman who comes to the temple, who is the wife of the dead man, she claims to have killed her husband, Taka Hiro, after being raped by thieves and this was to save her husband's honor because her husband had to witness the wife being raped and he was helpless over there. And she also claims that, perhaps to get more credibility, more believability to her version of the story, she also claims that she attempted suicide multiple times but she was not successful in that.

And she has also successfully presents herself as a weak victim, the one who does not have any kind of agency, who is nearly a victim of the situation. But one is not too sure when we go through the many details that she presents to us. The murdered man, he also speaks to us through our medium and he claims that no one killed him, he says that he killed himself and this is, this could also be because of the, this reason for, this would also be because he is trying to preserve his honor, because it is more on the ripple to kill oneself than being killed while tied to a tree than claiming that his wife killed him or thief or local bandit killed him.

So he is also perhaps lying, one is not too sure. And finally we have Tajomaru, the bandit, the thief in the question and his claims, he had another exaggerated version of how heroic his

deeds were. And he claims that he killed this man in a duel in a very noble way, after violating his wife. And he does not see that act, the violation itself as image crime and he also presents the story in such a way that his heroic, his nobility, his sympathetic attitude to the victim, they begin to get more accentuated.

And he is saying that he was forced to kill this man in a duel, only because the woman said she wanted to be the wife of whoever survived, that she cannot live with the fact that 2 men had seen her shamed. And we also find him getting excited by the fact that he has killed a highly trained samurai warrior, that too in a fair fight. And he also asks, very heroically asks for the worst penalty possible and here we find him doing this more for the sake of this reputation that would endure even after his execution.

And it is perhaps the memory of this glorious battle he thinks will outlive him even after his execution. We can find a number of inconsistencies in this story. For example, the woodcutter claims that he was cutting his daily quota of cedars in and out of the way Grove. One tends to be a little sceptical about this claim because on a daily basis, it is not needed perhaps for the woodcutter to go into and out of the, go into and out of the way Grove. The Buddhist priest, he claims to have taken little notice of the girl's details, the woman's details, but he is able to recollect the colour of her clothing.

And he is able to even estimate this woman's height, though she was sitting on a horse. The priest does not tell us about any kind of interaction that they had but the details that he provides us, it makes his claims suspect that he was merely passing through and had barely noticed it. The policeman comes across clearly as a naive and as an inept fellow and he is more bent on convincing his supervisor than giving the right version of the story.

The old woman, we find her protesting too, she is of course emotional and she has every right to do so, but she also protests too much when she claims that her daughter had never known any man except Taka Hiro. And this is (( ))(14:56) also begins to make us a little suspicious. Tajomaru, there is every reason when we go through his version that he must have perhaps omitted a lot of details and occasionally due to his exaggeration, due to particularly the way in which he presents himself has this global heroic figure, it tends to be unbelievable as well.

The woman, the woman who was the victim here and she says that her husband was tied to a tree, while she was getting violated by the thief and after the thief had left, she does not make

any attempt to remove, after the thief had left, she fails to remove the bamboo leaves from her husband's mouth, she only says that she takes this nod from her husband as response and affirmative that he wants to be killed. But she removes ropes after stabbing him to death.

This also comes across as slightly unbelievable because she does not make any attempt to save him and assumes that he would rather be killed and does not give him a chance to speak up. And then to make her tale more believable, she gives this narration of the failed suicide attempts that she made. The samurai who talks to us through the medium, his attitude to the rapist and the wife, it is also a bit strange. The moment he realises that the wife is paying attention to the thief's words after being raped, his attitude entirely changes and that is what the medium claims.

And he also begins to think of the nobility of the thief and says he could pardon him for the kind of kindness that he showed towards this man who was tied with a rope. And he also begins to denigrate his own wife. And his version says that his wife outran the thief, which is not really possible, given that she is also, her costume is also quite heavy and it would be quite impossible for her to run an escape in that unfamiliar territory. And this question of who removed the sword from the samurai's body, that also leaves this quite open-ended.

There are certain premises which we can take for granted, based on the recurrent facts that are presented by almost all the narrator's. Taka Hiro, the samurai, he is dead, and Tajomaru had violated Masago, this woman, the thief had violated this woman and that also had happened brutally which we get to know from all the versions. And we know that in all these versions, there is this consistent occurrence of Masago, the wife wishing the husband dead.

And the reasons given for this vary, in her own versions, it is to preserve the husband's honor. In Tajomaru, the thief's version, it is because the woman instigated them to fight with each other, which is why he had to go for a duel. And in the dead man's version, the wife chooses to leave with a robber and instructs the robber to kill him. And in all these versions, we also get to know that after the violation and after the death of this man in whichever way the version say, Masago and Tajomaru, the woman and this robber, they have not left together, there is no one who has claimed that they were together after the man's death.

Apart from these premises, we do not have to many details to resolve this story, to resolve this murder. If you ask this question, who did it, there is no answer to it, it could be anyone of those. All of their versions are equally believable and all of their versions are equally under

suspect, there are only certain common factors that we can elucidate from this, some common premises that we can extract from this to recreate the story, at least in a partial way.

After the story was made into this movie, Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon*, the term *Rashomon* in fact came to be used widely to describe how different witnesses are able to produce contradictory accounts of the same event, though each version is presented with equal sincerity and each is plausible. And this is particularly interesting, because this story and the movie version tells us that there is a way in which each of these 7 narrators are able to present their version as the most believable version.

Of course they contradict each other, but when we take each account separately, it is difficult to find loopholes in them. Only when we look at them together, we begin to see that all are equally fallible. And we cannot trust any of them together and even collectively, unlike the common truism, that collectively the the whole picture will begin to emerge, we only find the whole picture getting more and more blurred and more complicated and totally unable to resolve.

So, if we ask this question towards the end of the story, what exactly happened, who did this murder, who removed the sword, did the woman want to kill his kill her husband or not, that, did she really gets violated and was the thief's attitude towards the man and the woman, was it of a sympathy or is he just being the smart criminal? There is no way of doing it. And the story is also challenging the fact that there is no way of knowing the truth and which is where the modernist and even the post-modernist tendencies of the story began to expose itself.

The story is underscoring the fact that there is perhaps no truth, there are only different versions of it. And through these 7 narrators and through these 7 testimonies, Akutagawa is also showing us that none of them are totally evil, nor are they totally noble and the truth, the reality, it is somewhere in between. And what is real is given to us, only through these narrations, it is a mediated kind of reality that we get, there is no way of knowing the real truth, even when one is actually there is because eyewitness accounts can also be mediated by other vested interests and other kinds of versions, which is what the story is telling us.

And we find the influence of truth, though in a very indirect way, modernism and Buddhism. Though they may seem as apparently not connected with each other, modernism in terms of the narrative technique, in terms of the newer thoughts which are coming out and Buddhism

in terms of its celebrated attitude that there is nothing certain in this world and whatever we see and whatever we perceive to be reality may not be reality at all.

The story has been the focus of interest of a lot of critics and there are some possible readings that have emerged from this story. Just like the story disputes the possibility of a single truth, these readings have also refuted the possibility of a single reading, single interpretation. These are some of the possible readings that we can come across. The image of the samurai, we do not find this dead man, we refer to as the samurai, except by this mother, except by this woman who claims to be his mother-in-law.

Others refer to him as a body, as the corpse, as an unfortunate man, so there is a reduction of his heroine, he is merely reduced to a dead body. And he is also robbed of all his symbols of power, unlike the Japanese tradition, especially given the fact that this was written in the early 20th-century. Akutagawa deliberately tries to break away from these dominant images. So, this figure of the samurai, he has robbed of all his symbols of power, the sword in his arrows, the priest when he 1st sees him, he especially notices how his, he is armed very well, he is equipped very well.

But later he is deprived of these privileged symbols, instead he is left with just a robbers rope and ladie's coat. And we also find the samurai, especially the Thief's version, he is blinded by greed, he is not this hero can supersede all such basic emotions and he is also unable to protect his wife, when he is in the popular imagination, presented as the hero who can protect anyone and everyone. And his testimony is also suspect, we find him, we suspect that he is lying to save his reputation, to save his honor.

There is the figure of a Buddhist priest, we also find the use of a medium and there is this woman who walks into the Buddhist temple. We find certain images of religion, especially Buddhism, though not directly but we find that even religion is unable to provide a solution over here. It celebrates only this broad dictum that everything is uncertain, that even religion cannot provide a resolution when something like this happens. The woman, the figure of the woman is presented in an interesting way.

There is dichotomy between the ideal and the actual. The woman herself tries to present her as a weak victim but the versions of, especially the thief and the man who is dead, they begin to present a more ambiguous, more complicated picture of the woman, where she comes across as not just a weak, not just as a victim but also as being manipulative. Having said



that, it is also useful to remember that even contemporary critics and readers, they all claim to be finding new truths or rather newer facts from this entire story.

This is also a story which can be read in whichever order. So, it also celebrates a certain post-modern spirit in that way, you need not necessarily have to start with the 1st section. Though there is a rationale in arranging the 7 sections, it is in order of the increased involvement of the narrators in this entire episode, direct or indirect. Even if you read it in whichever reversed order or even if you start reading it from the middle, from say 3rd or the 4th section onwards, it does not make much of a difference in terms of recreating the story.

So, it also celebrates this post-modernist hypertextual version of narration. And this is the story with multiple interpretative possibilities, it is a story which gives an active role to the reader and this is also a story in which the author is trying to tease the reader by giving us a story, giving us certain kinds of details and deliberately keeping away certain significant ones, so that the reader would never reach the so-called destination. And finally the story is the celebration of the kind of narration where the meaning making, where the focus is only on this process of reading and not on arriving somewhere and not on arriving at the destination which gives the final meaning of the story.

More than the final meaning, what is celebrated here is the absence of a single meaning. As we begin to wrap up, I would also like to leave you with this note that the movie version tries to make it a little more coherent, the movie version tries to introduce certain newer elements because the movie also needs elements as the dialogue and there is also some kind of a resolution towards the end which comes across as being, comes across as being more hopeful.

Akutagawa's original story, it does not romanticise anything, it does not try to give out a ray of hope, it remains as stark as ever, as ambiguous as ever, it leaves the reader to come up with his or her own interpretation. But Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and with a ray of hope and there is the image of a baby, newborn which is introduced to show that in spite of all of this, life will continue to move on with hope forces, this was the story 'In a Grove' for you, I hope you enjoyed listening to this, I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.