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Capitalism as an Ideology Criticized through Allegory in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *Kappa*

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Abstract

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's novel entitled *Kappa* (1926) is believed to be the allegory of Japan's structure of politics and the economy in the 20th century Japan. Yet, none of the study focused on describing the function of this allegorical *Kappaland* and its society to criticize the system of capitalism in Japan. Thus, the writer finds it important to scrutinize how the author of the story employs the allegory, as a rhetorical device of literary works, to criticize the reign of the dominant class in Japanese systems of politics and economy.

Focusing on the allegorical characters, setting, and significant events, this study seeks for, the evidence that *Kappa* is the representation of Japanese society. Some events are created to signify the real condition of Japan in the early of 20th century, after the Meiji Restoration. The effect of industrial revolution brings several questions, including the role of the State and its apparatuses, to be problematized in this study. In addition, Akutagawa points out some of the lacks and shortcomings of humans through the allegorical characters and events in *Kappaland*. The settings are employed to show the life-likeness of *Kappa* and humans and support the wholeness of allegory. Analysis on parallels of *Kappaland* and Japan is deemed important to reveal the criticism Akutagawa raises through the characters and the significant events. The setting of the story is pretty similar to what Japan was experienced, for instance the massive industrial production linked to the capitalist mode of production, the accumulation of power and wealth to the small amount of the dominant class. It is observed that *Kappa* is a disgusting and deformed mirror Akutagawa gives to humans to reflect their life.

Keywords: capitalism, ideology, Akutagawa

Introduction

The idea of capitalism grew in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912), as the island empire emerged from over two centuries of feudal isolation. Japan realized that the Western countries were far more advanced in the economic and political matter. Then, to be advanced, they had to imitate the way Western countries run their economic affair. It then marked the rise of industrialization in Japan. Many businesses were developed; the chance to export goods to outside countries was widely open.

During the time, the mode of production of Japanese society altered from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production. It was when the production of goods and materials no longer took place in the house of individuals as a home industry. Rather, the production was held in factories which were owned by individuals or groups who paid the people to work in their company. This is what Marx, describes as the system of production in which a number of craftsmen were assembled under one roof. This system had characterized the European industry from about the middle of the sixteenth century to the last third of the eighteenth century (Ike, 1949:186).

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Kappa as a Dystopia:

A Study of Akutagawa's Anti-utopian Thought

Ho Koon-ki T. (Hongkong)

Kappa (1927), also known as *Gulliver in A Kinnou*,¹ by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) is one of the longest works of the author who had contributed altogether one hundred and forty-nine stories and tales in his short span of life, and perhaps one of his most extraordinary in terms of the puzzles and interests it renders to critics and readers both at home and abroad. *Kappa* is also one of the author's masterpieces that are frequently and widely translated into foreign languages, and in some languages, more than one translation is available.² The way this novelette appeals to translators does not seem to work on literary critics that well. At least, we do not hitherto find a serious article devoted solely to *Kappa* in English, while there are three full-length English translations of the novelette.³ The present article may meet this need.

The first publication of *Kappa* in the March 1927 issue of the magazine *Kaizō* gave its author's contemporaries as much bewilderment as the news of his suicide did a few months later. Many critics were stunned by the apparent incongruity between the relatively lighthearted fairy tale elements and the implicit bitterness in the novelette. Some critics simply disregarded the bitter elements and related *Kappa* to Akutagawa's famous children's stories. Other critics, on the other hand, ignored the fairy tale elements altogether and read it

1 In Shinjōji Seichi's 1947 English translation of *Kappa*, „Gulliver in A Kinnou” is put as the subtitle of the novelette (Ōtsuka Akita-ya 1947).

2 Amano Kōtarō has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of Akutagawa's fictional works in Western translations. See his „Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: ukushin jinkōkugo yakuboshu” [Bibliography of works by Akutagawa in foreign languages], in Yōzōma Seichi, Tazuma Kazuhiko and Tsuru-itsu Kiyao (eds.), *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: kōron no hōka* [Literary works of Akutagawa: overseas criticism and evaluation] (Tōkyō: Waseda Univ. Press 1972), pp.3–42, subsequently cited as ABKNH.

3 The three translations in chronological order are: Satorino Seichi, tr., *Kappa: Gulliver in a Kinnou* (Ōtsuka Akita-ya 1947). This work was twice revised and published by the Hokuseido Press in Kyoto in 1949 and 1952; Kenyas Takashi and John McVittie (tr.), *East is Japanese stories*, introd. John McVittie (New York: Longlight 1961), pp. 299–405; Geoffrey Bownas tr., *Kappa*, introd. G.H. Healey (London: Peter Owen 1970). Bownas' translation was then published by Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc. of Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo in 1971 and is now in its sixth reprint. See Tazuma Kazuhiko, „Jōbei no Akutagawa kōshiki to honyaku” [Studies and translations of Akutagawa [and his works] in Europe and America], in: ABKNH, pp. 293–314 for a discussion of the three translations; see note 30 below.

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