A Mother's Contrition: A Study of Regret and Sacrifice in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the emotions Kei and her daughter go through, in Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*. The novel has characters who travel through time, mainly to set things right in the past or the future. These characters are filled with regret about the past or anticipation about the future, which makes them want to travel through time. The rules to travel are, however, very difficult, that it takes desperation in the part of the characters, to follow the rules and risk travelling. The paper focusses on Kei, a pregnant woman with a weak heart, who must face the fact that she might not live to see her daughter after her delivery. This prompts in her the desperation to travel to the future, to see her daughter at least once. The readers soon discover that the daughter from the future had also once visited Kei, right when Kei became pregnant, to see her mother before she passes away. The paper studies through these two characters, how time travelling eases the regret and awards the sacrifices of the characters, providing them hope, a closure for their emotions, and making their present life a little more bearable.

Keywords**:** regret, sacrifice, fulfilment, magical realism, time-travel

Before the Coffee Gets Cold is a novel by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, published in 2015. This novel revolves around a café in Tokoyo that allows people to travel back or forward in time. In the novel, what seems as something simply intriguing or even irrelevant to some characters, forms the core of existence to others. People who wish to travel in time are those who have something critical going on in their lives that they wish to change. These people have regret, remorse, or yearning, and wish desperately to travel through time, so that they could dissolve their sorrow to some extent.

The café is hundred and forty years old, located in Tokyo in Japan. It is named 'Funiculi Funicula'. It is situated in a basement with no windows, and three large antique clocks, the hands of which show different times.

Because time traveling, in some ways, goes against the natural order it becomes pertinent for it to be divorced from the outside world. Firstly, the fact that it is situated in a basement with no windows, brings in a mysteriousness. It becomes impossible for the customer to experience the café and the food in relativity to the outside weather or scenery. The experience thus becomes secluded, lonesome, or cocooned according to the customer.

Secondly, the three antique clocks, showing three different timings add to the mysteriousness. Kawaguchi himself agrees that without the clock, it is impossible to tell whether it is night or day. Hence, the clocks represent the past, present, and future and their intertwined nature. As for the café, it exists as much in the present as it does in the past and future (Mishra 104).

The café has a set of rules to follow to time travel. During the time travel, the person traveling can meet only the people who were present in the café at the mentioned date and time. They can travel only through one seat in the café and can never leave it. The seat is usually occupied by a ghost, and the person can only travel when the ghost leaves the seat to go to the washroom, which is once a day. The waiter in the café pours hot coffee and the person should drink it up and travel back before the coffee gets cold. These intense rules make it difficult for people to travel freely through time. These are

meant to discourage people from travelling, which often works. As a result, the people who travel are the only ones who desperately need it.

The novel has four stories in which each character takes the decision of travelling through time for their individual purposes. These purposes are usually rooted in regret or the search for reassurance. The first main character in the story is Fumiko, who wants to go back in time and set things right with her ex. The next character is a nurse named Kohtake who wants to revisit her husband who is affected by a severe case of Alzheimer's. Another character is Hirai, who wants to revisit her dead sister so she could apologise to her. The fourth character is Kei who is a staff member in the café. She wants to go to the future to visit her unborn child because she knows she will not survive her pregnancy because of her weak heart. "Apart from memories and stress among these characters, one can witness the unconditional love between them. All these were portrayed with the help of magical realism" (Sathya and Bindu 452).

The paper explores the remorse and redressal of Kei to make sure her baby lives a good life in the future. There is an instance when a teenage girl from the future comes to the café. The staff are confused, and the girl does not hold conversations with anybody there. She searches for Kei who later enters the café, returning from the gynecology clinic. She observes Kei and Nagare, who is Kei's husband, also working in the café. She sees Kei talking to him and patting her stomach, happily sharing the news of her pregnancy. This makes the girl happy for some reason. The girl later hurriedly calls Kei and requests her to take a photo with her. Kei does and the girl immediately "vaporized into steam," (Kawaguchi ch. 3). like the café time travelers typically did. Everyone then goes on their day, unaware who the girl is. This does not disconcert Kei though, because she knows that time travelling does not give anybody the power to change the future.

During her fifth week of pregnancy, Kei's symptoms start worsening because of her weak heart. The doctor informs Nagare "Frankly, your wife's heart may be unable to withstand childbirth…If she chooses to have the baby, she has to realize that the possibility that both she and her child will survive

is very low" (Kawaguchi ch. 4). He informs Kei, who knows it all along. She is filled with the fear of leaving her child to grow without her in the world. "'I'm scared… the thought of not being there for my child is frightening…I don't know what I should do. I want my child to be happy. How can such a simple wish be terribly scary?' she cried" (ch. 4). These lines portray her helplessness in this situation. The author, through Kei, shows characters who are stuck in the claws of hopelessness, that ultimately leads to regret. Through the magic of the café, these characters are sometimes offered chances to expiate their situations, which, if not for the magic, they will not be able to do.

The sorrow of not being able to raise her daughter or even get to know her hits Kei hard. The ghost sitting in the time traveling seat usually never moves for other customers. She leaves the chair only for bathroom breaks. Observing Kei and listening to her story, she closes her book, looks at Kei, blinks once and leaves her seat. It feels to Kei like she was coaxing her to visit the future. Though Nagare is hesitant, Kazu, the waiter, helps her move forward with her plan. She promises that she will make sure her child will be present in the café in the future, at the exact time, so Kei can meet her then. Kei makes a wish to travel ten years from then on 27th August, which is her birthday. She does this so that it could be easy for Kazu to remember the date, to hold her child in the café. Kazu pours her coffee and reminds Kei to drink it before it becomes cold, and return to the cafe. "A shimmering plume of steam rose from the full cup of coffee. Kei felt her body shimmering as if it were steam. In a moment, she had become as light as a cloud and everything around her had begun to flow as if she were in the middle of a film playing on fast-forward" (Kawaguchi ch. 4). She travels to the future.

She travels fifteen years into future; unlike the ten years she had planned. She searches for Nagare and Kazu in the café, who she learns live in Hokkaido. She is rather greeted by an unknown man who is the then manager. Later, she meets a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, who previously visited her to take a picture. Right then, Nagare calls her from Hokkaido and tells her that the schoolgirl is their daughter. Her name is Miki. Through some mishaps, Kei travels fifteen years into future. The girl too identifies her mother. Both initially struggle to form conversations. Miki leaves the room. Fumiko, who

also works there in the future, enters the café, realizes the urgency of the situation, and brings Miki out to make them talk. Almost at the time of her mother's leaving, Miki opens up and conveys her love and gratitude to her mother. She thanks her for bringing her into the world and both the mother and the daughter sob. "'Thank you' said Miki with the broadest of smiles. 'Thank you for having me. Thank you…'" (Kawaguchi ch. 4). At this moment Kei realizes how these second chances are crucial, because they almost give a person a new life. Miki is able to see her mother after fifteen years and Kei is assured that her daughter is alive and well, surrounded by people to care for her. Like Deborah and Sitohang state,

> By the aforesaid explanation, it is understood that their decision on trying to redo things by visiting the past or the future resulted nothing on their present life. Furthermore, this puts the use of time-travelling into a question. However, the author of this novel tries to portray one thing, which in terms of text, that the possibility of change would only happen through time-travel. Since they know precisely all the rules and the course of action to be taken, it is the hearts of the time-travellers that have been transformed. (594)

Through magical realism applied in the novel, the author brings a closure to the emotions of the characters. According to Bowers, magic is "any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (19). Part of the literary genre, the narrative of magical realism depicts a juxtaposition of two ideas, magical and realism (Debora and Sitohang 582). In the words of Faris, "these fictions disturb received ideas about time, space, and identity" (25). But only through these disturbances, the characters can rectify their past or future; something that does not exist in reality.

The novel deals with the anxiety of separation from a loved one, and the grief and regret that follows. In Kei's case, she is forced to live with the awareness that she will never be a part of her daughter's life. While the novel maintains that situations cannot be changed, the concept of time travel gives the characters assurance over their helpless situations. "Almost every character had stress and

tears as a result of memories, and through the experience of travelling through time, these people were able to relieve their stress and adopt a new outlook on life" (Sathya and Bindu 455). It gives them the chance to say the words that they regret leaving unsaid, which makes their emotions in the present better. "The novel explores the necessity for individuals to live in the present and pursue life without regrets" (Mishra 106). Kei reflects on this in the end. She realises how the people who travelled were able to lead a happier life, after just being able to talk their emotions out by time travelling. When Kei travels and sees that Fumiko, Kazu and Nagare lavish her daughter with kindness and protect her, her regret decreases and she feels assured that her sacrifice to give birth to her daughter is not in vain. She embraces her upcoming death peacefully.

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