

## THE MOUNTAIN IS MOVING

Patricia Morley. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999.

BY CLARA THOMAS

Patricia Morley, a Professor Emerita of English from Concordia University, has spent some months over a number of years investigating and recording the lives of Japanese women today. She is well equipped for the task—a Canadian Literature and Women's Studies specialist, well-known for her academic writings, since the early 1980s she has been both intrigued and increasingly familiar with her subject, bringing to it the tact and unceasing curiosity of a well-trained investigative journalist. She has earned the confidence and trust of her many informants, for her treatment of their masses of evidence is even-handed and, I believe, unfailingly honest. Although the book ends with a summary chapter detailing all the many signs of salutary shifts in thinking and acting for Japanese women, still its final sentence sounds a conditional note: "Until the mountain moves." Its positive side, *The Mountain is Moving*, chosen as title for the work, seems to me to do a disservice to the unremitting honesty of Morley's work.

Certainly I find occasion for optimism in the text, but only in a limited way, for elements of a centuries-old culture based on what we in the west would call a radical discrimination against women is still very powerful. The Japanese, whom we know to be so adaptive, so capable of enormous and speedy change, are still so dominated by a structure that in every way favours men that a western-style "liberation of women" is still beyond my imagining.

Her chapters on "Housewives," "Education," "Women in the Workplace," and "Caring for the Elderly" are to me the most engrossing, sketch-

ing a picture of a culture that is in many ways radically different from our own, yet one in which the thrust for women's empowerment is basically the same never-ending struggle against custom and prejudice. In almost all areas, though, there is a vast difference in the degree of emancipation already achieved for women. We of the middle class in Canada almost take educational opportunities for granted; Japanese women are still very far from being able to do the same. In the professions we are more and more able to look to pay and employment equity, but this is by no means yet the case in Japan. The presence of poverty is still a crippling drawback for women both here and there—poverty negates opportunity at all times and in all places.

Morley has assembled a wealth of data to illustrate her various chapters, an embarrassment of riches in fact. Fewer examples might have better served her purpose, setting her various major themes in starker relief. As it is, we are convinced, over-convinced, and finally, somewhat discouraged by the inexorable march of data before us—too much about salarymen, who have no lives beyond their work, too much about the obsessive and expensive educating of the young for the very same boxes that entrap their parents, and too little that convincingly counteracts the negatives of such a culture, in spite of many many examples of valiant attempts at so doing. Finally one has the sense of a vast cultural chasm between Japan and Canada, in spite of all kinds of superficial similarities, some of them amusing to read of and recognize, as is the passage on retirement and its gruesome effects on men and, even more especially, on women. How often the old refrain, "I married him for better or worse—but not for lunch," resounds through both our societies.

I am much engaged by Morley's chapter on writers, their recorded interviews with her, and the evidence of their strides forward in the last few decades. But always and through all

of the text there is the troubling implication that moving towards the western way is the answer for Japanese women. I willingly admit my ingrained distrust of the traditional missionary optimism that seems to me to inform this attitude, a distrust that is heightened, by no means blunted, by Arthur Golden's contemporary *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Such an ancient culture as Japan's, such a geographical vulnerability as their islands represent, and such a combination of the extremes of adaptability and conservatism as their laws and customs demonstrate suggest to me a wide-open future of possibilities of which westernization may or may not be a dominant strain.

There is no doubt, however, that in *The Mountain is Moving* Morley has given us a book we will enjoy reading, sometimes in compassion for women whose lot is so much less fortunate than our own, sometimes in admiration for their efforts, and sometimes in the humbling albeit cheering realization that in our aspirations we are, indeed, "sisters under the skin."

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