

Changing Lives:

Wonderful Treasures to Japanese Women and Peace in the World

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On August 15, 1945, people in Japan gathered around the radio in order to listen to *gyokuon-hōsō* — the imperial broadcast. During this broadcast, the Japanese Emperor announced the acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration: unconditional surrender. This was the moment when the long-lasting, painful war was finally over. Some people might not have been able to understand the situation and accept the sudden news that Japan had lost the war, but others might have been relieved because the painful war had finally come to an end. The book, *Changing Lives: The “Postwar” in Japanese Women’s Autobiographies and Memoirs* by Ronald P. Loftus (2013), explores these different responses. He writes that “women and men did experience the end of the war differently” and, surprisingly, the “defeat in war had been, for women, the most wonderful treasure imaginable” (Loftus 2). This treasure came about because opportunities for personal and political freedoms started to open for women in the postwar period (2). Loftus explores several Japanese womens' memoirs — Okabe Itsuko (nonfiction writer and cultural critic), Yoshitake Teruko (activist, historian), Shinya Eiko (stage and screen actress), Sawachi Hisae (nonfiction writer), Kishino Junko (newspaper reporter, adjunct professor of African-American literature) and Kanamori Toshie (reporter, Kanagawa Prefecture grass-roots activist) in order to understand what the end of war and postwar

Japan was like for women.

The book opens with the story of the Japanese defeat in the war and explains the importance of reading memoirs to understand the Japanese women's experience. Then the book provides the reflections of Okabe, Yoshitake, Shinya, and Sawachi on that day that Japan admitted defeat and explains how this event affected their later lives. This basic information about Japan and the stories of these Japanese women help readers understand later chapters, which focus on the memoirs of three Japanese women in particular: Yoshitake, Kishino, and Kanamori.

This book is well organized and the stories move in chronological order, so it was easy to follow. The detailed memoir of each Japanese woman enables readers to understand the day Japan lost the war and the postwar period of Japan through a woman's perspectives. Moreover, this book tells us the importance of equality and peace, not only in Japanese society, but also in societies across the world. This focus makes people realize how the Japanese people devoted themselves to develop their own society after the war and guides contemporary readers to think about what we can do to keep and develop what our ancestors have built, regardless of our background.

The most effective part of this book is that it explores not only the special gifts the end of the war gave to women, but also how these gifts affected women's lives. The book deals with an important theme: what it means to be a woman in postwar Japan. Japan was democratized and Japanese women were given opportunities for education at colleges and in the workplace. Loftus depicts the positive side of democratization in Japan but he also explores the negative side by incorporating stories of Yoshitake

and Kishino, both of whom experienced discrimination at their workplaces. Kishino's striking quote, "I couldn't help being haunted by recurring feelings of regret that I had virtually erased that part of me that is woman" (137), indicates the harsh reality that a lot of Japanese women faced. They had to erase part of themselves in order to be successful at work. Loftus succeeds in describing both the good and bad sides of the special gift Japanese women got after the war. The fact that women had to give up being women to succeed in Japanese society helps the book to explore further the serious and complicated topic of what it means to be a woman at that point in history.

Another effective approach of this book is that by introducing different experiences of both the end of the war and the postwar period, it helps readers understand postwar Japan from multiple perspectives. These different experiences and perspectives of postwar Japan emphasize the importance of equality and peace both in Japan and in the world. It also asks the readers to think about what Japanese people should do to develop Japanese society. The life story of Shinya, whose various plays opposed the war, is quite different from the story of other Japanese women. Shinya focused not only on peace in Japan but also peace in other countries. Her life story as an actress and her statement that, "people are all people" (24) imply the great importance of peace in the world. Similar to Shinya's story, Kanamori (who was a reporter and Kanagawa Prefecture grass-roots activist) also comes from a different perspective, as she focused more on Japanese social issues such as the elderly. Kanamori proposes what Japan and Japanese people need to do in order to solve social problems and develop Japanese society.

Even though the book is well organized, there are some parts that are difficult to follow. These sections might confuse readers or cause them to lose interest. For example, there were many social movements that occurred in Japan after the war, and they are mentioned in the memoirs, but Loftus only briefly describes them in his historical overview, which can be confusing. On the other hand, Loftus will occasionally explain one movement in great detail for few a pages and then repeat that description in another chapter. He focuses on one movement because it is very important in order to understand postwar Japan. However, repeatedly explaining one movement in great detail, in multiple chapters was, at times, redundant.

Overall, this book efficiently shows the end of the war and postwar period of Japan from the female perspective. Loftus used relevant excerpts from the memoirs of each Japanese woman, and incorporated these in a very organized way. Applying the different stories of Japanese women enables Loftus to describe postwar Japan from different perspectives. This book does not merely deal with postwar Japan, but also gives insights about postwar Japan in terms of peace, equality, and what it means to be a woman. These issues have been controversial throughout history and knowing more about postwar Japan is very important to understanding the current situation in the country. Furthermore, even though this book is about Japan, there is something that appeals to readers elsewhere in the world: the cruelty of war and the importance of equality and peace. Therefore, this book is beneficial not only for students who are learning about Asia, but also for a wider, general audience.

Works Cited

Loftus, Ronald P. (2013). *Changing Lives: the "Postwar" in Japanese Women's Autobiographies and Memoirs*. Ann Arbor, MI: The Association for Asian Studies.