

# Class struggle and cultural change in the last samurai essay

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Class struggle and cultural change in *The Last Samurai* Societal change has always been brutal, in the same way that giving birth has always been a painful and bloody experience. History would show that the birth of new societies were often characterized by brutal battles, which, according to Marxist theory, reflected the struggle of one class with another for control over political and economic power. In the course of these changes, the culture of the defeated dies out or is lost, to be replaced by the culture of the ones who prevailed.

This theme is evident in *The Last Samurai*, Edward Zwick's tale of Japan's transformation from a largely feudal and agricultural economy into an emerging capitalist country at the end of its closed door policy in the late 1800s wherein Japan's modernization also spelled the demise of the Samurai culture and class. Interestingly, the story is told through the involvement of a westerner, Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), in the creation of Japan's military ambitions. Algren, an American soldier disillusioned by the violence of the Native American suppression which he participated in, is tapped by the emperor's aide Omura (Masato Harada) to train new recruits for Japan's 'modern' army patterned after the regiments of the West. Later he is sent to the mission itself—to quash the uprising of the disenfranchised Samurai class who are now considered a minority class—ironically a mirror image of his bitter experience back home. The rashness of his superiors, however, sends Algren to a doomed battle with the samurai led by Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) where he is captured and taken by his enemies to their village.

It slowly becomes clear here that Algren's exposure to the samurai village and culture represented the Japanese encounter with western culture (or more appropriately, American) or conversely, the American culture with the Japanese way of life. The film also attempts to establish the notion that western culture, which tends to view itself as a 'superior' culture, has often looked at other cultures condescendingly, and this bias has often hindered it to fully understand the ways of others. This is shown in the number of scenes wherein Algren's superior lumps up the Native Americans and the Samurai as "savages" and in the way that Omura brands the Samurai as "renegades" who cling to tradition. However, the viewer is also shown how Algren was able to develop an appreciation for the customs and traditions of his 'enemy' through careful and painstaking study and by exerting enough effort to understand.

His endeavor leads him to embrace the culture in its totality and makes him decide in the end to switch sides from the 'oppressor' to the side of the 'oppressed' or disenfranchised. The concept of societal and cultural change in Japan was likewise interwoven with the other conflicts such as the growing western influence and the corruption it brings on the local elite with their self-serving interests. Likewise, one cannot miss the play of contrasts and opposites in the film which is also a prominent theme such as Algren's western features but having a Japanese heart compared to Omura who was born Japanese but had a very westernized attitude. Likewise, the city of Tokyo as the beacon of modern Japan, with its noise and thriving commerce, is compared with the solitude of the rolling hills and solitude of the samurai

village. The decline of the Samurai's power, both politically and economically, is also displayed in the way that the sword is shown to have lost its relevance in preserving and guarding the emperor since it has been replaced by more advanced weapons.

Perhaps the beauty of this film was its ability to maximize its medium in delivering both the graphic and subtle messages through the use of the different film elements—lighting, cinematography, and of course, camera angles and shots. While the musical score felt contrived as in most big-budget Hollywood movie, it sounded alright for the most part, such as the drum beats accompanying the music during battle scenes. The lighting was also very useful in creating the particular mood in each specific part of the story. For instance, shadows and darkness were often used to depict Algren's troubled state of mind and heightened his struggle with his nightmares; This brightened gradually as he is able to come to terms with the brutality that comes with his duty and as he slowly learns to embrace the samurai way of fighting and living. In fact, the final battle scene is done in a bright sunny day (despite the fact that the protagonists are clearly disadvantaged) which seems to convey that the samurai's choice to die in battle than surrender is honourable and praiseworthy. Another reading, of course, would find an irony in such a scene wherein men are massacred by the hundreds—or where a culture is figuratively eradicated—in stark contrast to the cheerful atmosphere. The shots were also well-executed, focusing mainly on the face and in the eyes to show the feelings of the characters since some of them spoke mainly in Japanese.

Wide, lingering shots of the background and scenery were also very helpful in setting the context of the story. With regards to the actors, Ken Watanabe was a stand-out and whether Tom Cruise was picked for the lead role for his box-office appeal or for the demands of the role of a 'lost and disillusioned' foreigner, he nevertheless delivered a good performance here (although he has to work into changing his facial expressions more). Unfortunately (or should it be fortunately?), the film does evoke romanticist feelings for the past long gone, where 'backward' people and cultures who know the essence of honor, courage, honesty, and self-sacrifice are preferable to 'technologically-advanced,' 'modern' culture that lacks the value for life and respect for human integrity.