

History or His Story? Ōe Kenzaburō; a Personal Narrative to Rewrite Japan

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ABSTRACT

On August 15, 1945, the people of Japan were summoned to hear the Emperor's speech. Anticipating a decree to attack the invading American enemy, they were astonished to hear a declaration of the end of the war. While thanking his subjects for their efforts, the Emperor announced that the war had regrettably resulted in the Potsdam Declaration. Emperor Hirohito called on his people to "endure the unendurable and bear the unbearable." Even today historians continue to appraise the changes occurring in Japan after the war; while the changes are discernible, their causes require further evaluation. The commonly accepted premise is that these changes were brought about by the reforms of the American occupation. However, there are other voices claiming the continuation of historical processes that had started in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century.

One such voice is that of Ōe Kenzaburō (born 1935) one of Japan's prominent postwar authors, a writer who does not confine himself to the perimeters of literary writing but rather takes an active part in public life. In all of his writings, we find a personal-private narrative that weaves itself into the fabric of the public and social dimension. Among his key motifs are his

childhood village, the Emperor, and Japan's moral ethics as he perceives them in the past, present and future. Using both Ōe's literary works and his public activity, this article presents the significance of these motifs in connecting postwar Japan to its prewar history, arguing that Japan and the Japanese people have, in fact, never freed themselves from their past, and as such, are still in search for their lost identity.

KEYWORDS: Postwar Japan, Ōe Kenzaburō, Japanese History, Japanese Literature

AUGUST 15, 1945. The announcement that the Emperor would be making a personal broadcast reached every corner in Japan. Millions of Japanese gathered around neighborhood radios to hear the Emperor's voice for the first time. In his address Emperor Hirohito did not use the words 'surrender' or 'defeat.' Although he spoke in a highly formal language, his call to "endure the unendurable and bear the unbearable" was understood by his Japanese subjects: Japan had been defeated in the war, a war they had been fighting in the Emperor's name. At that very moment, the year Showa 20 transformed to the myth historical year of 1945, and the postwar era had begun. The seemingly definite break between prewar and postwar Japan is commonly explained by the Japanese aspiration to put the past behind as the 'new Japan' was being built. This idea of discontinuity was well received and became the myth of a new beginning. However, a deeper look offers traces of continuity, as the roots of the 'new Japan' were planted deep within the history of the 'old Japan.' As Dower (1990) argued, "the Japanese of the postwar era, like their Meiji predecessors, may have undertaken to reinvent themselves; but they necessarily did so with the materials at hand" (50).

Ōe Kenzaburō (born 1935) is one of Japan's most prominent postwar

authors who converses extensively about the consequences of the war, referring particularly to Japan's physical destruction alongside the moral. His discourse allows for a thorough investigation of this complex subject from the meeting point between two coordinates: the historical horizontal and the individual vertical (Arieli 2003). As Ōe wrote, "the fundamental method of my writing has always been to start from personal matters and then to link them with society, the state, and the world in general" (1995b, 109).

This point of convergence adds a vital perspective to the conservative interpretation of history, placing the individual interpretation within the wider context. There are many difficulties inherent in defining the borders of historical research in conjunction with literary research. Literary works may or may not incorporate historical facts, and historical writing can also demonstrate artistic qualities; the distinction between the two is, therefore, often controversial. For this reason, historical-literary research requires the author to engage in biographical writing, be it autobiography, location biography or periodic biography. In other words, the author must base their writing on material of undisputed authenticity. In a lecture given in 1986, Ōe validated the significance of Japan's postwar literature to current historical understanding:

The various units that were part of the 'plot' of modernization beginning with the Meiji Restoration took on a dual meaning with the defeat....Thus the Japanese, in losing the Pacific War, saw for the first time the entire picture of the modernization of a nation called Japan; and it was postwar literature that most sensitively and candidly painted that picture of Japan and its people. (Ōe 1995b, 71)

Using both his literary work and his social activism, this article displays Ōe's fictional and non-fictional oeuvre as an ongoing integration between his activity as an author and as a social activist, thereby fulfilling his conviction of the author as a moral compass. I will present Ōe's works and ideas in relation

to the historical research conducted by several leading historians and critics in the field of Japanese studies.

Dignity Versus Humiliation and Shame: the Motif of the Moral Death

Ōe was a six year-old village boy at the outbreak of World War II. He was nine when his father, a soldier of the imperial army, was killed, nineteen when he left his remote village and moved to Tokyo, and twenty eight when he first visited Hiroshima, shortly after his son was born with severe brain damage: “as a child I did not believe the old saying that one's whole life can be decided by the events of a few days. But now recalling my summertime experience some thirty-two years ago, I am forced to concede that such a decisive time is surely possible” (Ōe 1996a, 7).

One of his well-known early short stories, *Shiiku*, 1957 (translated as *Prize Stock*), is dominated by the notion of death. Ōe used a hideous description for both the natural death that occurs at the opening of the story, as well as the unjust, war-prompted brutal death that comprises its end. Both descriptions lead to this conclusion about the vicious bloody reality of the war:

“the war, a long bloody battle on a huge scale...was never in the world supposed to have reached our village. But it had come....And suddenly our village was enveloped in the war, and in the tumult I could not breathe” (Ōe 1997, 166).

This symbolized for Ōe the deterioration of Japan as a whole. It thus becomes clear that the natural, relaxed atmosphere portrayed at the beginning of the story is not intended as a display of city life as an alternative to the village, but rather it is Ōe's way of enhancing our understanding of reality (Napier 1995, 31). *Shiiku* reflects not only the destruction of war but also the end of the ingenuous era and the start of the reality of war.

The majority of Ōe's works incorporate the death motif ranging from actual death (for example, natural death, suicide, death at war, child mortality), to symbolic death (the death of society or culture) and their consequences. The origins of this death element lie in an early dilemma of his childhood. Ōe remembers watching a film in which a young soldier captured by the enemy chose to commit suicide rather than reveal military secrets:

I shuddered, terribly moved and trembling in fear. I had a premonition that I, too, would surely be reduced to a similar extremity during the war. It became for me a pressing matter to decide what I would then do. While I was deeply moved by the soldier's action, I also doubted, as a terrified child with a selfish love of my own life, that anything was so important to me that I would risk or give my life for it. A newcomer in this world with no reason to leave it, I felt an unspeakable fear of my own death. (Ōe 1996a, 101-102)

This testimony, brought forth by Ōe's 'older self' (thirty year-old Ōe) through the voice of his 'younger self' (ten year-old Ōe), symbolizes his growing awareness of the enticing power of life in contrast to the moral power of death. Here, as in other examples in Ōe's works, the reader can detect the gap between these two voices. This gap exemplifies the synthesis of the actual historical facts—in this case young Ōe's real childhood memory of the scene he watched—with the retrospective adaptation of the older Ōe who created his possible young self. This half-imaginary character presents us with the negative reaction toward the patriotic education of prewar and wartime Japan that exhorts loyalty to the Emperor over the individual's own life. Unlikely to have been the young Ōe, it is rather his older self, entwined with the younger, who leveled this criticism. Ōe stated that this dilemma accompanied his thoughts long after the war ended, at a time when there was no real threat of being sent to the front.

As time progressed, he was better able to understand his dilemma and rephrased it: "when will I change from one who might be killed after being

humiliated or shamed to one who might kill himself with dignity?" (Ōe 1996a, 104). The use of the words "dignity" (*igen*), "humiliation" (*kutsujoku*) and "shame" (*haji*) (Ōe 1995c, 97) represents a significant turning point. As a student of French literature researching synonymous words in French and Japanese, Ōe noticed the extensive use of these words in French literature and their notable absence in Japanese literature. Once noticed, Ōe (1996a) understood that the ghosts of these words would never cease to haunt him (103). He explained their significance for him and, in a sense, for Japan and the Japanese as a whole:

The terms 'dignity', 'humiliation', and 'shame', which came to my vocabulary this way, are still the most essential terms to me. I saw things related to the worst sort of humiliation in Hiroshima; but for the first time in my life I saw there the most dignified Japanese people. Moreover, the words 'dignity', 'humiliation', and 'shame' are not such simple terms in the context of the place where the cruelest experience of human history occurred. (104)

Constructing Memory: the Things We Remember and the Things We Forget

The discourse regarding remembering and forgetting in postwar Japan remains an intense ongoing concern among scholars, Japanese and non-Japanese alike. Ōe's preoccupation with terminology is shared by scholars discussing the construction of both national and private memory. Examples can be seen in the works of various researchers, such as Gluck (1990) who discussed "history in a passive voice" (12) stating that "the China Incident was caused, Pearl Harbor was bombed, the atomic bomb was dropped" (12). Similarly, Karatani (2004) examined the way in which the word 'Showa' is used, emphasizing that meaning is created by either forgetting or remembering: for example, from around the end of the Showa period, people tended to look back at 'Showa history,' referring by that to only the first nineteen years of the period and forgetting the postwar years (51-54). Etō (1974) explored the rhetorical uses and

moral responsibility of terms such as “loss”(*sōshitsu*), while also looking into the construction of memory as indicated in his 1979 work titled *Wasuretakoto to wasuresaseretakoto* (things we forgot and things we were made to forget). In *Hiroshima nōto*, 1965 (translated as *Hiroshima Notes*), Ōe (1996a) debated the concept of remembrance, arguing that:

People everywhere on this earth are trying to forget Hiroshima and the unspeakable tragedy perpetrated there. We naturally try to forget our personal tragedies, serious or trifling, as soon as possible.... It is not strange therefore, that the whole human race is trying to put Hiroshima, the extreme point of human tragedy, completely out of mind. (107-108)

Since his first visit to Hiroshima, the city, its monuments, and especially its people have become an integral component of Ōe’s identity: “by taking Hiroshima as the fundamental focus of my thoughts, I want to confirm that I am, above all, a Japanese writer” (Ōe 1996a, 180).

It is interesting to note how Ōe links Hiroshima to his personal life. In his essay *Atarashibungaku no tameni* (for the sake of a new literature), Ōe (1995a) spoke about the basic literary technique of de-familiarization. He argued that by creating a distance between the readers and the story, the writer allows the reader a space in which to better understand and critically assess the events of the story (25-51). In *Hiroshima nōto*, where both the writer (Ōe) and his readers —assuming they are not *hibakusha* (survivors of the atomic bomb)—are to begin with distanced (de-familiarized) from the portrayed tragedy, he did the opposite: he tried to bridge the distance and enhance the feeling of togetherness between the reader and the *hibakusha* stories. His piercing criticism of the world and its inability to deal with the enormity of the events of Hiroshima suggests that he himself is trying to avoid additional criticism from his readers, and this is one of the reasons why he would like the readers to identify with the *hibakusha*. Additionally, through his almost total

identification with the *hibakusha*, he came to understand that his childhood dilemma was no longer relevant: death is not the ultimate moral choice. This perception led him to criticize those who chose suicide, be they his rivals, such as Mishima Yukio, his friends or even the *hibakusha*, and opt for life over death for his own son.

The Personal Matter and the National Matter

The decision to choose life for his newborn baby and the ensuing implications become the focal point of most of his writings after 1963. In his most popular novel, *Kojintekinataiken*, 1964 (translated as *A Personal Matter*), there is a dialogue between the protagonist Bird and a doctor at the hospital after the birth of Bird's deformed baby:

“Besides if I may be frank, I think the baby would be better off dead, and so would you and your wife. Some people have a funny way of being optimistic about this kind of case, but it seems to me the quicker the infant dies, the better for all concerned. I don't know, maybe it's the difference in generations. I was born in 1935. How about you?”

“Somewhere around there,” Bird said, unable to convert quickly into the western calendar. “I wonder if it's suffering?”

“What our generation?”

“The baby!” (Ōe 1968, 31)

This dialogue presents us with the uncertainty of the young father regarding his baby's future, showing the wide gap between Ōe's perspective and that of others of his generation. The doctor represents Ōe's generation and thus favors death as benefitting the group over the individual. He senses the father's indecision and assumes that he is of the new generation who does not accept death as the right choice. The doctor tries to explain this to the father, but it becomes clear that they were in fact born around the same time and hence the

gap between them is personal rather than generational. At the end of the quoted dialogue, the confusion between the suffering of the baby and the suffering of their generation stands as a metaphor for the confusion or exchangeability between the subjective and the group. As the story progresses, Ōe showcases the comparison between the individual and the nation. The monster in the following quote represents not only the baby but also the present, and he argues for the need to take responsibility in both cases:

If I want to confront this monster honestly instead of running away from it, I have only two alternatives: I can strangle the baby to death with my own hands or I can accept him and bring him up. I've understood that from the beginning but I haven't had the courage to accept it. (Ōe 1968, 210)

The question here is not whether Ōe's generation understands the present or their responsibility, but rather how they understand it and how this affects the reality in which they live. It is here, in this personal novel, that Ōe's own regrets for having suffered this uncertainty about his son's life can be seen. This uncertainty is representative of all of Japan:

I am confronted by a thought which I can only let pass through me like a storm with my face red and my head bowed, a thought that will circle around me my entire life. For five weeks or so following my son's abnormal birth, I had longed for his death, in other words, to destroy him. My longing was not based on a revelation from Allah appearing in a dream, nor the agreement of my son. It was merely my egotistical desire to protect a future for myself and my wife, who still knew nothing of her baby's abnormality. (Ōe 2002, 90)

The War Reaches the Village: the End of Ingenuousness

Another motif widely employed in Ōe's writing is his childhood village in the forest of Shikoku and the changes it underwent: "the two overlapped—my fictional forest and my boyhood home. I've written my childhood many times. The real and the imagined are all mixed up" (Fay 2007, 14). In the novel

Memeushirikouchi, 1958 (translated as *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*), Ōe combined his longing for village life with a stinging criticism of the village people who he no longer characterized as good or innocent. The story takes place during the war when a group of fifteen delinquent boys head to a remote mountain village. The day after they arrive in the village, the boys realize that an epidemic has broken out and that the villagers have fled for a neighboring village overnight, leaving them behind. As the story unfolds, the boys are joined by a Korean boy, a deserter, and a village girl who has also been abandoned. This encounter with other outsiders allows the boys to gain a new perspective on the “normative” world:

“You’re free now, aren’t you? You can do anything you like in this village; wherever you lay your head, no one’ll catch you.” I said. “You’re really free, aren’t you?”

“We’re still not free, you and I,” the soldier said. “We’re cut off.” (Ōe 1996b, 144)

This newly acquired perspective reflects Ōe’s critical view of the war:

I thought of simple graves laid out endlessly from those reference points at equal intervals, countless bodies to be disposed of. With all the battlefields in the world, how many people are going to die? (97)

Ōe’s reinforces his criticism through several dialogues between the youth and their new friends, for example, the following dialogue with the deserter:

“I didn’t want to go to war,” the soldier suddenly said broodingly, “I didn’t want to kill people.”

This time a longer silence, a sense of intolerably uncomfortable discord, filled us. We had to hold back uncertain giggles that made our stomachs and backsides itch.

“I want to go to war and kill people,” said Minami.

“At your age you don’t understand,” the soldier said, “but then suddenly you do understand.”(112)

When the danger has passed, the villagers return. Fearful of

repercussions should it become known that they abandoned the boys to die, the villagers alternately threaten the boys with violence and provide them with food. The boys agree to keep silent with the exception of the narrator. At the close of the novel, the narrator escapes to the forest, chased by the villagers.

Suddenly a wind blew up, carrying the sound of the villagers' footsteps growing nearer, closing in on me. I got up, clenching my teeth, and dashed into the deeper darkness between the trees and the darker undergrowth. (Ōe 1996b, 189)

History and His-Story

The darkness of the forest in *Memeushirikouchi* symbolizes the darkness over Japan; an unknown darkness allowing one to run away and hide yet limiting the vision and leaving one without hope. Ōe's choice of the war period for this novel is interesting. He presents his personal criticism of the war in a timeframe that actually precedes the development of his own insight and criticism of the war. In doing this, he seems to be conveying the message that the majority of the Japanese were blinded by their patriotism and could not see the actual effects of Japan's aggressiveness. The only ones to see this were the outsiders. As a radical intellectual writer, far removed from the mainstream, Ōe is able to identify with the outsiders of society, those who from time to time are also oppressed and persecuted. In this novel he presents the transformation both he and the nation experienced; a transformation from the Emperor's patriotic youngsters (*aikokushōnen*) to democratic and politically active young people (*minshushugishōnen*) (Napier 1995, 5) but without letting go of the past. This was a transformation that was to define both Ōe's and Japan's identity forever. In his introduction to Ōe's *Two Novels: Seventeen & J*, Masao Miyoshi argued that this polarity defines Ōe as one who keeps on looking for a stable place in an uncertain world (Ōe 2000, 14). Ōe (1995b) supported this argument in his own way:

After a hundred and twenty years of modernization since the opening up of the country, contemporary Japan is split between two opposite poles of ambiguity. This ambiguity, which is so powerful and penetrating that it divides both the state and its people and affects me as a writer like a deep-felt scar, is evident in various ways. (117)

By referring to this extended period of time, Ōe linked two momentous periods that exemplify the continuity of history, even for Japan with its almost complete transformation following 1945. This connects with other interesting analyses and arguments, such as Dower's comparison of the two dark periods that led Japan to modernization: the *bakumatsu* (1853-1868) which started with the enforced opening of Japan by the United States and ended with the Meiji Restoration, and the period of 1931-1945 known in Japan as *kuraitanima* (the dark valley) and referring to the years of extreme militarism and nationalism which preceded Japan's surrender. For Dower (1990, 50) both periods represent "the accelerated processes of change that occur in a periods of acute crisis." Likewise, Gluck (1990) suggested a thought-provoking, un-chronological continuation of Japan's process of democratization, asserting a direct relation between prewar and postwar Japan and leaving aside war-time Japan (4). The spatial rather than chronological representation is a literary technique used by Ōe in order to create a new seamless universe that is connected to real historical events and thus to reality (Loughman 1999, 417).

One of his most mesmerizing novels, *Man'engannen no futtobōru*, 1967 (translated as *The Silent Cry*) oscillates between 1860 and 1960. This novel represents Ōe's harsh criticism of Japan's route to modernization and its effect on society. The symbolic link between these two years is the United States. In 1860 Japan was about to embark on modernization and sent its first delegation to the United States, exactly six years after signing the Japan-US Treaty of Peace and Amity, known as the Kanagawa Treaty (1854). Exactly one hundred years later, modern Japan extended its security treaty with the United States, initially

signed in 1951. Takashi, one of the novel's protagonists, sways between Ōe's real life experiences and imagined experiences. Like Ōe, he takes an active part in the 1960 anti-treaty movement, yet unlike Ōe, following the treaty's signing, he moves over to the pro-treaty side. Like Ōe, Takashi travels to the United States. However, upon his return, he decides to leave Tokyo and go back to his native village in Shikoku; an act possibly born out of Ōe's own unfulfilled wishes to recover his lost childhood village (Bradbury et. al.1993, 17). Takashi convinces his reluctant brother Mitsusaburō to join him.

Mitsusaburō's state of mind echoes Ōe's emotional reaction to various events in his personal biography, particularly those associated with despair, such as his devastation following a friend's suicide, and his psychological breakdown following the birth of his brain-damaged son. The two brothers discover records of village events that took place in the past hundred years, events which include their own family, the Nedokoro (a name comprising the characters for *root* and *place*). These include repeated cycles of brutal violence, destructive uprisings, sex crimes, remorse, and self-punishment. As the story progresses, the two brothers find themselves repeating the history of the men of the Nedokoro family. Takashi trains a football team like an army and leads them in an attack against the monopolistic supermarket owner, a Korean referred to as "the Emperor." The village falls into a state of anarchy and, amid the chaos, Takashi tells his brother about a sex crime and a murder he has committed. He subsequently commits suicide, an act which inspires Mitsusaburō to rebuild his life. He and his wife, who is bearing Takashi's child, restore their relationship and leave the village. They are going to retrieve their disabled son who they have left in an institution, await the birth of the new child, and build a new life in Africa, where Ōe himself had wanted to move before the birth of his own son Hikari.

On reading this novel, it is impossible to ignore the historical deconstruction of Japan, Ōe's extended family and his own personal story. This understanding provides a context for his comment about the novel:

One of the motives I had for writing this novel was my growing awareness at the time of a culture in Japan that was very different from the dominant Tokyo one. The work is set in my native village in Shikoku, but even that village is a part of Japan that was undergoing a major transition then. After the defeat in the Pacific War, reconstruction according to a mandate issued by Tokyo was carried out in every corner of the country, my village was no exception. (Ōe 1995b, 31)

A further example of historical deconstruction can be found in the novella *Mizukarawaganamida o nuguitamau hi*, 1972 (translated as *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away*). This is one of Ōe's most difficult stories to read; lacking a chronological outline, it has nameless characters, various hints at historical representations that alternate as the story progresses, and above all, an uncertainty of meaning. The story is set in the summer of 1970 and is told by a thirty-five year-old author-narrator who is hospitalized as a result of real (in his opinion) or imaginary (in the doctor's opinion) cancer. This man dictates the "history of the age" (Ōe 1977, 23) to a second narrator, probably his wife but possibly a nurse. The conversations between the narrator, his wife/nurse, and toward the end of the story his mother, serve to present Ōe's criticism of the main narrative that carries the historical story. The key characters of the fictional historical story are the narrator's father and the Emperor, and the story traces the father's attempt to lead an uprising on the last day of the war, striving to save the Emperor mainly from himself.

In a description of the "human emperor" (43) on August 15, 1945, Ōe wrote: "the Emperor swiftly descended to earth to announce the surrender in the voice of a mortal man" (98). Although the Emperor has become human, he still encompasses divinity, and thus even in his death, or his second death, he remains the symbol and the father of the nation:

August sixteen, his Majesty was circling upward in a swift ascent again. Though it was inevitable that he die in a bombing once, now truly he would revive as the national essence itself, and more certainly than before, more divinely, as a ubiquitous chrysanthemum, would cover Japan and all her people. (98-99)

There is no doubt that in this story Ōe leveled his most intense criticism at the Emperor and the emperor system, alongside his parody of Mishima and his traditional seppuku in the name of the Emperor. Some Japanese critics have considered Ōe the representative of the anti-emperor intelligentsia (Napier 1989, 86). However, the parallelism between the Emperor and the father in this story cannot be ignored (87). The following dialogue exposes this ambiguity about the concept of a father figure, and it is evident that Ōe was emphasizing rather than camouflaging this issue:

Why do you keep calling him a certain party? Can't I change it to 'father'? When you say 'a certain party' he sounds like an imaginary figure in a myth or in history....To make someone sound like an imaginary figure can be away of debasing him, but it can also be a way of exalting him into a kind of idol. (49-50)

The feeling of abandonment enhances Ōe's description of the father-son connection. Napier (1995) argued that the fatherless world and the subsequent sense of loss intensified the fear of becoming orphans of history, a feeling which is expressed in Japanese postwar literature in general (12). This offers a better understanding of Ōe's feelings; initially as a child who lost his father in the war, later as a patriotic boy who lost the Emperor, the father of the nation, and lastly as a mature adult, disappointed with the new superior American power who took over the role of a father figure but who, being both foreign and temporary, could not replace the former model (12-13). It becomes clear that beneath his anger, which he expresses in parody, Ōe remains lost. He longs to reclaim his own history by finding the mythical emperor figure, one that will unify Japan and lead it toward a better future:

Is there anything more terrifying than not being Japanese, not being the Emperor's son? This concept scares me more than death. I'm not afraid of death. For even after I die, the Emperor will live on. (Ōe 1989, 21)

Ōe's is a complex search; he is looking for both a lost personal identity as well as a national identity embraced by the Emperor. However, unlike many others, Ōe has no intention of either forgiving or forgetting the Emperor, let alone of being led to conclusions other than his own. General MacArthur, the supreme commander for the Allied Powers, convinced the US and the Allies to exempt Emperor Hirohito from the war trials, constructing a postwar image of Hirohito as a pacifist and constitutionalist, and thwarting the "subjective sense of war responsibility" (Bix 1995, 345). Reading Ōe's works is to pass through the tatters of Japanese society in its entirety, both its objective and subjective history. Ōe does not allow for the repercussions of the bombs or Japan's consequent surrender to be ignored. But he underlines an additional form of destruction: moral destruction. He described this dual destruction in a public speech in 1992:

True, Japan has been modernized, but at the cost of an ugly war which started in China and which left neighboring Asian countries devastated. Japan itself was reduced to a smoldering ruin; Tokyo was razed to the ground, and a worse fate befell Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Still modernization continued with the postwar reconstruction and the subsequent period of rapid economic growth; but these have, in effect, led to a deeper kind of decline, a state of outright spiritual poverty. (Ōe 1995b, 25-26)

Insiders Versus Outsiders: the Motif of the "Other"

For Ōe, this dual destruction was created by the Japanese themselves and their longing for what he calls the true Yamato spirit. Today, the phrase 'Yamato spirit' has a nationalistic, militaristic connotation, linked directly to real and stereotyped Japanese aggression. This is certainly not the association that Ōe was seeking. Ōe's Yamato spirit traces back to the acclaimed eleventh century

novel by Murasaki Shikibu, *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*):

I would like to note here that the words first appeared in *The Tale of Genji*, coined by a woman writer with the specific and limited meaning... I believe she had in mind something not unlike what Aristotle calls *sensuscommunis*, that is, a shared sensibility. And if we further define this *sensuscommunis* as an innate quality that exist in human beings at a highest level comprising our intellect, emotions, and imagination, we could say that when Murasaki Shikibu speaks of “Yamato spirit,” she is referring to nothing more than a particular sensibility inherent in her fellow countrymen. (Ōe 1995b, 18)

The lack of Yamato spirit is variously described in his works, most specifically when presenting the hostility of a self-centered people, their lack of empathy, plain cruelty, and the overall absence of “shared sensibility.” These characteristics become most prominent when dealing with the notion of ‘others’ in society. The ‘others’ in Ōe's works can be divided into two groups. The first group is the ‘distant others,’ comprising the village adults or even the soldiers of the occupation. This is an unwanted group yet its members can still be part of society. The second group is the ‘close-by others,’ intentionally unseen by the majority and not accepted as an integral part of society. In this group are the handicapped, Japanese and Koreans *hibakusha* and similar outcasts. The members of the first group are part of Ōe's childhood memories and are included in his stories of village life. The second group is made up of people with whom he became familiar particularly after the birth of his son. Ōe found himself bonding deeply with this second group of outsiders who became a central theme of his later works and his political activism. It is interesting to note that while Sartre, who was the subject of Ōe's graduation thesis and a major influence for him, defined the self through the other, Ōe took this definition further, seeing others as sources of inspiration and even as role models. It was Hikari's traumatic birth that led him to meet and identify with such individuals. He described the birth and his life with Hikari in the majority of his later works. Referring to the early days, Ōe (2002) wrote:

When my son was born with a bright-red lump the size of a second head attached to the back of his skull, I found myself unable to reveal the true situation to either my wife or my mother, and, having installed the baby in critical care for infants at Nihon University Hospital, I wandered around in a daze. (42)

He continued by looking at other parents' reactions to Hikari, named Eeyore in Ōe's novels, and observed the effect of their behavior on their own children:

The parent who helped Eeyore said they saw our children as unclean, but I think they feel they're being attacked by something frightening. I think they feel their lives are being invaded by something that terrifies them. And I think their feelings will infect their children. (Ōe 2002, 181-182)

Later, he realized that the birth of his handicapped child symbolized a change that he himself had to undergo. He could no longer escape responsibility but had to face the challenge of improving his family's future. Once he had made up his mind, it seemed that no one would be able to change his approach:

“So you're going to manhandle a baby with the faculties of a vegetable into staying alive - Bird! Is that part of your new humanism?”

“All I want is to stop being a man who continually runs away from responsibility.” (Ōe 1968, 211)

The responsibility he assumes over the life of his child and family is closely connected to the responsibility he feels for the *hibakusha*. In the prologue of *Hiroshima nōto*, he describes his condition during the days preceding his journey to Hiroshima using the following words: exhaustion, depression, and suffocation (Ōe 1996a, 17). These feelings are derived from two significant events: the birth of Hikari and the suicide of his friend. While coping with these feelings, he decides to remain loyal to his decision to assume responsibility for his child. Ōe is searching for a reason to live or a reason to choose life, and he succeeds (Treat 1995, 240-241).

In his book *Embracing Defeat*, Dower (2000) portrayed the effects of the war among Japanese war victims. He argued that all cultures and societies show a certain lack of responsibility toward strangers or those who have suffered misfortune. However, in defeated Japan, a whole new category of “improper” people suffered from this stigmatization: the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, war orphans, street children, war widows, the homeless, and even soldiers suffering from combat fatigue (61-64). As Ōe’s identification with the *hibakusha* strengthened, so he began to perceive himself as ‘other.’ He compared their courage to choose life with his own childhood dilemma whether or not to die in the name of the Emperor (Treat 1987, 122). This comparison is interesting as it presents both decisions—young Ōe’s to live and the *hibakushas’* not to die—as morally right, although both contradict the norms of society.

And in places where no particular hope for living could be found, I heard the voices of people, sane and steady people, who moved ahead slowly but with genuine resolve. I think it was in Hiroshima that I got my first concrete insight into human authenticity. (Ōe 1996a, 181)

Conclusion

Ōe emerged into the literary scene just before the 1960s and displayed a unique and independent literary style. His uncompromising, radical opinions can be seen both in his literary works and his public activities. They were also evident in his firm standpoint regarding the public role of the author in articulating new principals to help guide the nation (Ōe 1996b, 10):

My ideas really haven’t changed since the sixties. My father’s generation characterized me as a fool in favor of democracy. My contemporaries criticized for my inaction—for being complacent about democracy. And the younger generation today doesn’t really know about democracy or the democratic postwar period—the twenty-five years after the war. They must agree with T.S.

Eliot when he wrote, “Do not let me hear wisdom of old men.” Eliot was a quiet man, but I am not—or at least I hope not to be. (Fay 2007, 4)

However, Ōe’s concern over Japan’s future should not be forgotten, along with his (self-nominated) role as a public figure that must carry the nation’s voice, which led him to enhance the voice of his younger self by reconstructing some of his own narratives. In other words, Ōe rewrote ‘his-story’ in light of his own changing perspective of history. This does not diminish his role as one of Japan’s authentic voices but rather adds dimension to his works that move between Japan’s history and his personal point of view. This emphasis and reconstruction allows us to delve into some of Ōe’s repeated motifs where we find not only criticism of some of Japan’s acts that he deems unforgivable but also self-criticism of the young patriotic Ōe whose opinions the older Ōe cannot tolerate.

In 1994 Ōe became the second Japanese writer to win the Nobel Prize, and his reputation reached new heights. However, he suffered a fall from grace shortly after when he refused the prestigious *Bunka kunshō* (Order of Culture) from Emperor Akihito, accusing the emperor of being an affront to democracy (Napier 1995, xiii). In a later interview he stated: “whenever I come across an intellectual with a tendency toward emperor worship I get angry. My response to this person is inevitably to start annoying him and then the fighting begins” (Fay 2012, 7).

Ōe refuses to accept the idea of *misogi*, the point of purification, the zero point, a concept that obliterates the past. He speaks against Japanese writers who consider themselves victims of the war rather than victimizers and, although he defines himself as belonging to the last generation of writers who were severely affected by the war, he constantly emphasizes both sides of Japan’s involvement in the war: Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at one extreme, and Japan’s war atrocities, at the other. Among his non-fictional writings,

Hiroshima nōto and *Okinawa nōto*, 1970 (*Okinawa Notes*) are the leading works dealing with Japan's responsibility for the war. While in *Hiroshima nōto* the blame is shared equally between the US (for using the bomb) and Japan (whose aggression caused this reaction), in *Okinawa nōto* Japan is held solely responsible. Ōe blames Japan for its oppression and discrimination and for the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in 1945. Finally, he charges Japan with establishing the norm of forgetting by taking this chapter of history out of school textbooks (Rabson 2008).

Ōe's personal retrospective traces the path from patriotic village boy to modern democratic and pacifistic writer. In his writings he highlights both the honorable choices and the critical mistakes he has made throughout his life. Although as an adult he holds radical opinions opposing Japan's military past and its leaders, Ōe is not trying to erase either his own or national early memories nor is he trying to live without relating to them. Rather, he is torn between two opposite poles: his memories of a past he was expelled from, and a modern democratic society that is constantly trying to forget its past. His exceptional ability to intertwine reality and fiction allows him to present a wider narrative of Japan's history which is constructed from a profound look both at mainstream history and at sub-narratives of Japan's neglected acts and people.

This picture in its entirety is what Ōe wishes us to remember. For him, this is the nation's history, composed from direct links between the past, present and future; this is what defines them as Japanese.

I would like to end with a final quote from Ōe which summarizes his self-image as Japanese and, in a certain sense, as a symbol of Japan:

I don't know if you can call it a narrative motivation, but I always want to let my readers know that it's me, this fifty-six-years-old Japanese male, who is writing this novel. (Bradbury et. al.1993, 23)

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