

Familial Autobiography and the World: A Review Article of Work by Kenzaburo Oe

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**Manuel Yang,**

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**Manuel YANG**

**Familial Autobiography and the World: A Review Article of Work by Kenzaburo Oe**

In this review article, I am discussing Oe Kenzaburo's *Kaifukusuru kazoku* (*A Healing Family*) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1995) and *Yuruyakana kizuna* (*A Gentle, Relaxed Bond*) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996). Grounding its state of being and transformation on what he fondly calls the geographical and spiritual "margin" of Japan, Oe Kenzaburo's work opens up the paradox of ambiguity -- that indelibly reflects in its unique and inimitable way the international, theoretically self-conscious character of that segment of contemporary literature which is very much concerned with border-crossing, hybridity, and other cultural signatures of postmodernity." Oe's formative influences do not fit snugly into the reified categories of what we take to be distinctly "Japanese," "Western," "Eastern," or, for that matter, "modernist" or "postmodernist." The oral tradition of village mythology and legendary narrative of peasant rebellions as transmitted through the voice of his grandmother lies at the origin of his literary imagination as much as his childhood reading of two books that cultivated, respectively, his compass of moral being and sensual appreciation of nature, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Wonderful Travels of Nils*. Later, this "compass of moral being" would develop a political form of its own under the influence of Watanabe Kazuo, a specialist in French Renaissance culture and Japanese translator of Rabelais who taught at the University of Tokyo, as well as through his systematic reading of Jean-Paul Sartre (whom Oe claims to be the only writer he read outside of class at the university -- Sartre's *The Age of Reason* was the topic of his graduation thesis). Throughout his literary life Oe has carried the habit of systematically traversing -- both in translation and in the original language -- the terrain of writers and poets, ranging from W.H. Auden to William Blake to Malcolm Lowry to W.B. Yeats to Dante Alighieri, and actively shaping them into metaphorical structures that undergird the images, style, and language of his major novels.

The succession of these influences in the "Western" tradition does not pose for Oe a dichotomous tension to his Japanese cultural identity -- as much as he has rejected the narrowly nativist or Orientalist streams of literary ideology to which some writers, both "Eastern" and "Western," have fallen prey -- but as integrative elements that bind and supplement it. The Sartrean investigation of literary commitment -- *littérature engagée* -- in the period of political and social upheavals in the late 1950s and 1960s, as well as the "structuralist baptism" -- as Oe terms it -- in the 1970s, that he had undergone were both attempts at theorizing and fructifying his literary practice, whose unitary movement was, as mentioned, constituted from the myths, voices, personal memories, and world-views embedded in the forest village of his childhood. Although such a literary orientation is very much part and parcel of the postmodern ethos of transgressing traditionally or hegemonically defined cultural borders and of assembling diverse cultural terms, elements, and relations to compose autobiographically distinct, creatively hybrid literary texts, Oe still maintains within his work a modernist conception of a writer as an autonomous, creative subject, whose moral agency counts as much as his or her propensity to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. To study the work of Oe Kenzaburo, then, is to contemporaneously explore the intimate interstices of comparative and world literature, to gauge within the span of a single writer's work the historical shifts and realignments that have taken place internationally on both geographical and aesthetic grounds with much creative turbulence and ferment in the last fifty years, and there are few textual guides better suited for initiating such a study than his two books of essays published in 1995 and 1996. *Kaifukusuru kazoku* (*A Healing Family*) and *Yuruyakana kizuna* (*A Gentle, Relaxed Bond*) are each a collection of essays that explicitly addresses the process of healing that the Oe family has undertaken vis-à-vis Hikari, Oe's eldest, autistic son. Both books were written after Oe's acquisition of the Nobel literature prize and, in style and appearance, are homologous (the second book is essentially a sequel of the first). Both books are extensively illustrated by Oe's wife Yukari and, in many ways, their form -- as well as

content -- exude this spirit of familial collaboration. One of the recurrent points of thematic reference is, for example, Hikari's musical composition and its relationship to Oe's creative work, and Oe expresses this relationship eloquently in detailed descriptions of Hikari's awakening to the sound of birds, discovery of his musical intuition, and the revitalizing effect this creative self-discovery has had on the father and rest of the family.

If contiguous in terms of the continuity of subject matter from his previous work, stylistically the two books constitute a sort of departure, a quiet and graceful simplicity of language has replaced the multilateral language and polyphonus voices with elaborate metaphors and long sentences that characterized his previous essays found in such collections as *The Persistent Will* (1968) and *The Day the Whales Are Annihilated* (1972). In the larger arc of Oe's literary life, such a stylistic transformation also, arguably, signifies a further entrenchment of his de-politicizing tendency that was noticeable in his work since the early 1970s. Although shifting its terrain of expression, this movement towards a simpler language continues to elaborate the themes of healing, recovery, and spiritual redemption that have powerfully animated and defined his "post-political" work. Oe's statements after the completion of *The Blazing Tree* trilogy (1993-1995), his self-proclaimed "last novel," have indicated that he intends to reform his literary style to a more elemental and down-to-earth shape after the fashion of the late work of Ibuse Masuji, the author of *The Black Rain* (1965), a classic novel about the survivors of the Hiroshima bombing. As with its companion volume, *A Healing Family* covers quite a lot of grounds and each of its chapters can be read in isolation from the others, as all the chapters each have an autonomous theme that functions as an organizing principle. Such autonomous themes -- ranging from the earnest and honest humor of Dr. Moriyasu Nobuo, a now deceased physician who was in charge of Hikari, to the making of Hikari's music CD and its concert performance to Oe's brother-in-law and film director Itami Juzo to Oe's teacher at Tokyo University, Watanabe Kazuo -- loosely form a family portrait that extends beyond mere blood lines and embraces literary relationships -- for example, Inoue Yasuhi's novel *Confucius* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are comparatively discussed in a chapter titled "Ah, Now, in My Hometown, a Light is..." around the tripartite metaphorical matrix of crisis, recovery, and redemption -- as well. It is Oe's literary conceit and testimony to his invariable capacity to register an apt term or an engaging image that each of the portraits and extended disquisition has at its center a particularly distinct word or phrase, flashing and illuminating the contours of a personality or an idea with a condensed, succinct gaze that is uniquely Oe's. What is, in fact, most striking about both of these books are the extraordinary sensitivity Oe displays towards language: certain words or phrases expand and fructify within his imagination to such a point that they take on associations and relationships that are deeply rooted in his personal family life, becoming the guiding thread to bring together what are, on the surface, widely variegated and only loosely connected topics.

Such words are, for example, "rehabilitation," "acceptance," and "decent," which form the tripartite, signifying context for a chapter by the title of "Accepting" (all translation from the Japanese are mine). Oe fluently interconnects these words in relation to a speech which he made at the World Congress on Rehabilitation held in Tokyo in 1988 and a documentary film about a twenty-year-old woman in a wheelchair who travels single-handedly through Kyoto to her grandmother's home in the countryside. The continuity of the two books is explicitly stressed through such linguistic bridges in the second volume, the first chapter -- also entitled "A Gentle, Relaxed Bond" -- has the following concluding remarks which set the tone of the rest of the book:

Having begun writing novels when I was a student and continuing that to today, I have not once taken formal employment. As concerns student life, I have never participated in so-called club activities -- when I was in high school, I had edited a journal for the cultural and literary club but, as that meant merely performing intensively that task about twice a year for a week and did not entail any activity within the cultural and literary club, I can't even remember the faces of the classmates with whom I edited the journal. On the other hand, although we have had a relaxed relationship, there's also a classmate like Itami Juzo who had become a friend for life. At university, despite my lack of money, I didn't live in the dorm. At first I wanted to live in a dorm but, as soon as the living arrangement was explained to me -- a few students got together and lived in a huge room in a dorm (such as I

haven't lived since I was in the old high school) -- I ran away ... And I think to myself whether or not such things are what prevented me to have an experience of becoming a "true adult." Especially in the middle of my forties to fifties, I was anxious if such a defect of character was not also the defect of my literature. It is true now, though, that I think such a human defect is itself a positive element within the totality of my literature. ... Thinking over such things, I would like to now produce a freely connecting series of writing with the concrete image of the "relaxed, gentle bond" as the central theme. I am hoping that such will be -- for me in my relationship with Hikari and in terms of my family as a whole -- a natural development of what I have grasped as "a healing family. (14-15)

The power of revelation that both of these books metaphorically seek to articulate -- with carefully chosen (one is tempted to say, "illuminated" by way of literary dialogue and imagination) words and phrases -- then has a literal counterpart in its ability to partially show us the background and autobiographical dimensions that were imaginatively fictionalized in Oe's novels from *A Personal Matter* (1964) onwards. Such power is not at all the stuff of solemnly composed, schematically formalized literature, as much as Oe has creatively appropriated structuralist, Bakhtinian, and Russian Formalist conceptions and ideas into his work. Rather, it lies in an intimate evocation of details and brief commentaries, as when Oe tells us off-handedly of his lifelong habit of endlessly searching for the right words and sentences to describe what he is seeing and observing as he is taking a walk or talking to someone. It is an enduring search sustained by an unwavering faith in the capacity of language to poetically crystallize the most pronounced features of an individual, a landscape, or an event into a few densely concentrated juxtaposition of words. This privileged stress on the power of language underlay his work from the beginning of his career (one may recall, for instance, his fondness for the terms "political imagination" and "situation" -- terms extracted from Norman Mailer and Jean-Paul Sartre, respectively -- which Oe profusely employed in interviews and writings during this period leading up to the late 1960s). And it is precisely this privileging of language which was instrumental in making possible the gradual transition from his politically vociferous -- at times even militant, albeit polemically -- voice to a more structurally mythological, even spiritually oriented one, denuded of its political substance except in name.

One of the most moving passages in the second volume revolves around a set of four chapters entitled "Twilight Readings," largely chronicling Oe's discovery of the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas (Oe includes in this section his Japanese translation of some lines of Thomas's verses). His description of the excitement, the feverish intensity, with which he paced back in a hotel room in Wales all night long until dawn as he read Thomas, impatiently telling himself how time was running out and how he needed to read all the books written on Thomas, gives one a sense of how Oe has continuously reconstructed and expanded his literary vision, how consistently Oe has kept his eyes afresh for new writers and thinkers to enrich and press him beyond whatever crisis -- personal, literary, or otherwise -- that he has confronted throughout his life. One comes to partly understand that, for Oe, reading -- usually designated as an antithesis of life and experience -- was and is an experientially essential act for the formation and development of his character and creative work. Although, as he himself never fails to emphasize, his work is deeply rooted in Shikoku -- the Southwestern island of Japan which is his place of birth and the area where his family resides -- with its mythopoeically conceived forests and marginality from the metropolitan center of Tokyo, this openness to influence, readiness to absorb influences, especially those stemming from the West, destabilizes the traditional dichotomous conception of Kipling's "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." In fact, what the actual history of international relations and political economy between these two regions of the world tells us is that the East and West were already always interfused with each other the European trade with and, later, colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Americas and, more recently, the ongoing neo-colonial relations with those same regions of the world or, as it is the case with Japan, regional delegation of control under ongoing U.S. imperial hegemony. Globalization, in short, was hardly a recent neo-liberal invention. One can date the cultural transactions lined in the conflicted, turbulent streams of this complex history all the way back to what Martin Bernal calls the Afro-Asiatic roots of

ancient Greek culture, but, whenever one lays the periodizing origin of this cultural coming together, negotiation, and hybridization, the fact that it is one of the defining features of world history and literature is hardly controversial today. Oe's literature may then be seen as a latest expression of this historically constituted heteroglossia, to borrow Bakhtin's term, composed of both "Eastern" and "Western" currents and elements that no one can say who really originated or invented first.

Apart from such insights, we also find valuable insights into Oe's "defects of character" which are altogether of different order from the sense above. In "The Cracks in My Identity" in *A Healing Family*, he explains to us the roots of his "defect": "I lost my father when I was ten years old. As my father at that time was fifty years old, I have already passed his age when he died. However, there are times when I realize how I still carry the defect of character that I could not overcome due to having passed from boyhood to youth without having a father. ... Shall I call that something anarchic at the fundamental level? Although I have lived trying not to be uncourteous to those who are my elders, there was always something in me that refused to recognize their authority. Although it appears contradictory, I also tended to have a heartfelt inclination towards elder specialists as if they were my ideal father. I lose my power of criticism to such people" (82). There is a glaring example of this loss of critical faculty -- which has long been the target of the more sensible critics of Oe, such as the Korean poet Kim Chi Ha and the Japanese progressive journalist Honda Katsuichi -- in the two respective chapters, "The Late Style" and "The Word 'Morality'," in *A Gentle, Relaxed Bond*. The two chapters in their turn recount Oe's visit to New York and the separate occasions during which he had talked with two intellectuals residing in that city, Edward Said and Elie Wiesel. The juxtaposition of these two men is quite striking, as both of them have long been vehemently opposed to each other over issues revolving around the persistently crisis-ridden situation in the Middle East, a place which has a central political and imaginative significance for both of them. Wiesel, who has survived the Nazi holocaust to impressionistically and movingly tell his tale in his classic novel *Night* (1958), is well known as a defender of Israeli state policies, exhorting himself and others to maintain "silence" in the face of whatever the Israelis do. Said, whose family was forcibly expelled from Palestine with the Israeli takeover and who is one of the foremost literary scholars of his generation, has consistently criticized what is essentially a colonialist and apartheid regime in Israel. It is possible that Oe is not aware of this division and difference between the two men. However, given the warm comments Oe extends to Said's humanity and struggle to carve out a passage for Palestinian national liberation that would exist on truly equal and mutually symbiotic grounds with Israeli independence, the absence of any criticism or comments on this point following an encounter with Wiesel is all the more astonishing -- or not, if one goes by what Oe has said regarding the loss of critical power to those "elder specialists" who have drawn his admiration. For someone who counseled the need for practitioners of literature to make statements on political situations with the risk of their total responsibility in his early years, it is difficult to observe this as anything other than a kind of critical devolution.

Partly an intimate family portrait (in an expansive sense, as noted); a memoir; a travelogue (a trip to Bali with colleagues and a "musical" journey to Salzburg and Vienna with his wife and Hikari at the invitation of friends are recounted in the first volume while the second volume mentions his trips to New York, Atlanta, and other parts of the world outside the North American perimeter); a collection of reproduction or excerpts from speeches, liner notes for Hikari's CDs, and letters he has written; background notes on a film adaptation of his novel *A Quiet Life*, scripted and directed by his brother-in-law, Itami); literary criticism; freewheeling essays in a quotidian mode; and, most significantly for Oe's future production, a preface to the elaboration of his "late style," the two books -- despite their simplicity of style and expression -- are as multidimensional a creature as the author is. Together, they are an eloquently carved mirror upon which Oe reflects his state of mind, life, and creativity right before his departure for Princeton in 1996.

Reviewer's profile: Manuel Yang works in history, contemporary Japanese literary criticism and the history of the trans-pacific working class at the University of Toledo. He is currently translating the writings of the Japanese anti-militarist poet Kaneko Mitsuharu.