

Monologue Amid the Shatters

Presented by Rotem P. Ayalon

In August 15, 1945, the people of Japan gathered around neighborhood radios to hear the emperor's voice for the first time. The situation in Japan was beyond hope; more than two million individuals lost their lives and countless more were wounded, all major cities were demolished, Japan's manufacturing ability and industry were no longer existent, and the same was true of major parts of the Imperial Japanese Army. Surrounded by the physical ruins of their country, the Japanese learned that they lost the war, a war they were fighting in the Emperor's name.

This paper, presented at *Urbanism, Urban Space, Urban Culture*, the first annual conference of the Israeli Association for Japanese Studies (IAJS), aims to showcase the repercussions of the destruction of postwar Japan as reflected in the works of Ōe Kenzaburō. The writing of Ōe, one of Japan's prominent postwar writers, relentlessly challenges the notion of the miraculous recovery of postwar Japan and offers us a look beyond conservative history. I titled this paper: *Monologue Amid the Shatters*, as Ōe is the sole speaker who wrote about and revealed the fragments of a culture and society that co-existed with the country's physical destruction. Ōe's monologue is directed both to his readers and to himself as part of his writing method:

I don't start writing a novel with a predetermined idea of which direction I will take a character or how I will create a certain character. For me, this is what the act of elaboration is all about. ...all of my novels are somehow about myself,

about what I am thinking as a young man, a middle-aged man with handicapped child, an old man. I've cultivated the first-person style as opposed to the third person.....The reason is that only through the first person I have been able to pinpoint the reality of my interiority. (Fay 2012, 10)

His Ideal Village

When going through Ōe's monumental early life events, one can discern the six-year-old patriotic village boy who witnessed the commencement of World War II, the nine-year-old who lost his father, a soldier in the Imperial Japanese Army, and the nineteen-year-old young adult who left his village and moved to Tokyo. In a public lecture given in 1992, Ōe spoke on "the importance of finding one's true place in life. As someone who left his native village and has lived his life away from it" (Ōe 1995, 14). For Ōe, this childhood village is the most genuine place, embracing the ideal reality. Hence, it is evident in the majority of his works, which symbolize the search for both his identity and Japan's true and righteous essence.

Ōe sees his role as a writer as the one who "create myths, modify myths and deconstruct myths" (Loughman 1999, 418). In his writing we find past and present, myths and reality intertwine. Through this method he allows us to witness the history, the possible history and the imaginary one. Using a spatial timeline, Ōe's works alternate between the physical debris and the moral one. In this regard, two intriguing opposing motifs are the village and the modern city. In Ōe's reconstructed reality, the village and its people are associated with honesty, naiveté, and simplicity. He therefore feels that this is his safe place, a place he would return to:

I recall my feelings that this was a temporary move and that the time would certainly come when I returned to the village in the valley (Ōe 2002, 101)

Ōe's need for the village's physical surroundings is also expressed in the novel *Shizuka-na seikatsu* 1990 (translated as: *A quiet life*). The story is told by a twenty-year-old daughter who stays in Tokyo with her two brothers while her father, an acclaimed writer (Ōe), accepts a visiting professorship position at an American university. This is one of Ōe's noted works that fictionalized his life events and let him swing between the actual reality and the fictional one. Putting his daughter in the role of the protagonist showcases Ōe's remarkable ability to present a portrait of himself as seen from his family's point of view. As the story unfolds, we learn that the reason behind the father's acceptance of the position is that he suffers from stress and depression and needs to be in a place in which he feels secure:

What father needs at such places of shelter is a lush growth of trees. Serious as she was, Mother chuckled when she said that no matter how shattering Father's many pinches had been, he had always taken stock of trees that were essential to his hideaway....While this was somewhat amusing, at the same time I felt sorry for Father, knowing that he had grown up in a valley enclosed by forest, and so in a pinch would try to return to a place where there were trees. (Ōe 1996a, 29)

Shortly after leaving the valley, Ōe is yet to understand city life and still sees himself as the marginal village boy who looks up trying to understand the character of this urban colossus:

I had set out from poignantly familiar place to live a marginal life in a corner of a giant city whose very topography was a mystery to me. (Ōe 2002, 31)

As time passes, the sense of unfamiliarity only gets stronger, the sense of mystery that may have embraced pleasant surprises is gone, and it seems that the city will never provide Ōe with a sense of belonging:

I had left the valley to live in stranger's "place" where there was no forest and no landmarks, only a river that was huge out of all proportion and unfamiliar trees.
(102)

In contrast to his lack of understanding of the city, the village and its hidden paths enable him to comprehend unclear notions:

Around the back of our house and down to the narrow slope that separated us from the neighbor's, you came to the Oda river. To my mind the river was an alternative to the main road that ran past the front of the house: when you put together a raft and floated downstream, meaning normally hidden become clear.
(37)

This village image, maintained by Ōe's childhood memories, predates the war and its consequences. By using a child as a protagonist in several works, Ōe portrays a naive assumption that the village's remote location should have granted protection from the war's reverberation. Nonetheless, as the war progresses it reaches the village:

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).

The above excerpt is taken from the end of the short story *Shiiku* 1957 (translated as: *Prize Stock*). Napier (1995) pointed out that while at that time most of the Japanese writers were

still entangled with the war—or developed avant-garde pessimistic narratives—there were two authors who “present almost fairy-tale worlds of extraordinary charm” (18). These two authors were Mishima Yukio and Ōe Kenzaburō. By incorporating images of the stark reality, Ōe destroys the illusion of the simple world of the village. Here again we find that the story is told by a young village boy. When his world collapses, the readers cannot avoid Ōe’s sophisticated criticism. This criticism does not spare his beloved village:

Now having left the valley for this great city, it occurred to me abruptly as I sat there in that large, impersonal building, holding my head in my hands next to a lamp attached to an even more impersonal cubical, that my valley was in its way also a dark valley, although it was not only in the negative sense that I was thinking of the word “dark” (Ōe 2002, 31)

Between Tokyo and Hiroshima

The Dominant Culture of Tokyo

For Ōe the city represents the national narratives which are, in his opinion “constructed only from the point of view of the matriarch” (Bradbury et al. 1993, 10) and, consequently, deceptive and unjust. For that reason he took upon himself to create “historiography that is the product of both a matriarch and a trickster working together” (10). These narratives were incorporated into Ōe’s works in the form of a critical examination of the modern urban culture alongside the neglected issues of minorities, war atrocities, and the other within the society.

In his earlier works (1957-1963) Ōe dealt extensively with the moral destruction of the city. His constant search made it seem as if he was physically trapped under the physical

debris of the war and there he found another destruction—the moral one.

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 1995, 25-26)

The moral destruction was realized in Ōe’s works via several motifs, one of which is the misfit people, the outsiders of society. Through their experiences he presents two important aspects; the first is the outsider’s point of view on modern society, and the second is the mainstream reaction to the outsider. Ōe’s outcast characters vary and represent a long spectrum of individuals, from the atomic bomb survivors and handicapped people, through rejected minorities up to sexual perverts. His ability to generate sympathy for those individuals who in most cases feel trapped within the modern urban culture is one of Ōe significant achievements. In his short story *Seiteki ningen* 1963 (means “the sexual men,” translated as: *J*), Ōe raised several harsh questions in regard to modern social norms. Among them we can find the notions of sexual perverts, suicide, mental disorder, and societal responsibility. Near the story’s end, Ōe leads us to believe that there is a solution and a way to rehabilitate even mental illness, but the very end shatters that belief.

All the outside clamor sprang to life again. Surely and ineradicably staining the woman's coat, his semen was real, a piece of evidence. The ten millions stranger of Tokyo glared at J with hostile eyes. J! they seems to call. Fear

struggle against bliss in a wave that rose up and engulfed him. Countless arms had seized him. Overcome with fear, J began to cry. (Ōe 1996c, 194).

Those marginal voices in Ōe's writings are the voices of wisdom. Through them Ōe presents both his criticism and his panacea. Among his outcast characters, Ōe puts his mentally disabled son, Hikari, and himself. This is evident in his latter works and allows us to share an essential part of his personal life.

In his critical observations Ōe also looks into the contemporary culture of the modern city of Tokyo, trying to rise above what he sees as the Japanese perception of the city that seems to represent Japan.

I am a writer who wishes to create serious works of literature distinct from those novels which are mere reflection of the vast consumer culture of Tokyo and the subculture of the world in large. (Ōe 1995, 121-122)

Additionally he argues that Tokyo's urban culture should not be categorized as part of the western world, and rather as a subculture of Japan's neighboring Asian countries. His criticism is enhanced by his statement about the way he sees Japan:

...for someone like me, born and brought up in a peripheral, marginal, off-center region of a peripheral, marginal off-center country (125)

The other city - Hiroshima

In a sharp contrast to Tokyo, Ōe found what he calls "the true Yamato spirit" in Hiroshima (18):

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 1996b, 181)

In a similar and yet very different way, Ōe found a direct link to his personal life within the people of Hiroshima. He deems Hiroshima as both a place where he feels he belongs and, at the same time, is an outsider.

Mr Matsusaka also wrote an article for the coterie journal *Haguruma* (Cogwheel), under the pen name Shishio Fukada. In it he put more explicitly the thoughts and feelings expressed in his letter to me, and I discern in his article a fair criticism by a Hiroshima insider toward the outsider. (20)

His strongest connection emerges from his decision to keep his abnormal baby alive and hence devote his personal and family life to his well-being. In his view, this decision is parallel to that of Hiroshima survivors who choose life at the fringe of society over death.

I was deeply impressed by their genuinely human way of life and thought; indeed, I felt greatly encouraged by them. I felt only pain when I tried to root out the seeds of neurosis and decadence that stemmed from the suffering caused by thoughts of my own son in the incubator. (18)

This is where the distinction between Tokyo and Hiroshima is evident; while Tokyo looked up at the modern, western, dull culture, Hiroshima rose from the ruins and reconstructed the genuine Yamato Spirit. Ōe therefore sees Hiroshima as the essence of his thinking:

By taking Hiroshima as the fundamental focus of my thought, I want to confirm that I am, above all, a Japanese writer (180)

In the case of Hiroshima, Ōe amalgamates the physical destruction with the human disaster. While doing so, he speaks about the wider consequences of the war and not the mere destruction wrought by the atomic bomb. This is where he uses the sub-narratives of the war history and shows Japan as both victim and victimizing aggressor:

Also I would like to do so as a citizen of a nation that in the recent past was stampeded into “insanity in enthusiasm for destruction” both on its own soil and on that of neighboring nations (Ōe 1995, 166)

In the broadest context of human life and death, those of us who happened to escape the atomic holocaust must see Hiroshima as part of all Japan, and as part of all the world. (Ōe 1996b, 107)

Similar to his ability to write about his personal life from his daughter point of view, Ōe brings a non-Japanese perspective on Hiroshima and the war. In his 1995 introduction to *Hiroshima Nōto* 1965 (translated as: *Hiroshima Notes*), he explained the road he took in order to reach this perspective:

At the time of writing the essays in this book I was sadly lacking in the attitude and ability needed to recast Hiroshima in an Asian perspective. In that respect I reflected the prevailing Japanese outlook on Hiroshima. In response to criticism from Korea and the Philippines, however, I revised my view of Hiroshima. I have focused more on Japan’s wars aggression against Asian peoples, on understanding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as one result of those wars, and on the special hardships suffered by the many Koreans who

experienced the atomic bombings. (9)

In this book he raised an additional international reaction, one that encloses his biggest fear, the fear of forgetfulness:

To put the matter plainly and bluntly, 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)

As for his role as a writer in this regard, he quotes from the poem *The Novelist*, written by his favorite poets W.H. Auden:

My profession...is that of the novelist who, as Auden described him, must:

...., among the just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,

And in his own weak person, if he can,

Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.

(Oe 1995, 122)

In the Realm of the Glories Past - Conclusion

As I bent down over the spring to drink from it directly, I had a sudden sense of certainty: certainty that everything.....was just as I'd seen in twenty years before; a certainty, born of longing yet to myself...And the same certainty developed

directly into a feeling that the “I” bending down there now was not the child who had once bent his bare knees there, that there was no continuity, no consistency between the two “I’s”, that the “I” now bending down there was a remote stranger. The present “I” had lost all true identity. Nothing, either within me or without, offered any hope of recovery (Ōe 1974, 58)

Similar to the end of his novel *Man'en gannen no futtobōru*, 1967 (translated into English as *The Silent Cry*), where the two protagonist brothers realize that they were after a mythical phantom of their heroic grandfather's brother (260-264), Ōe attempts to fathom the loss of the glorious myths of the past. This understanding leads him to voice his opinion about the need for a sort of meta-narrative, composed of Japan's history alongside its position within the world framework. Only then, when they embrace this idea of history, will the Japanese be able to move forward to encounter a better future that is not based on a fictional glorious past, and rather on the mistakes and lessons of the past. Although he maintains this unique, isolated voice within Japan's postwar writers, he himself sees the immense historical connection among his fellow writers who, like himself, cannot be detached from Japan's history and tradition: “post war Japanese writers have been living with the ideology of the present within history as the continuation of the past, present and future” (Günter et al. 1993, 304). In his Nobel prize speech titled: *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself* he speaks about this ambiguity and the difficulties inherent in it:

I have said that I am split between the opposite poles of an ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese. The pain this involves I have tried to remove by means of literature. I can only hope and pray that my fellow Japanese will in time recover from it too. (Ōe 1995, 127)

Ōe's efforts to clear this ambiguity lead him to open his monologue and carry out a dialogue between his two I's, the past one and the current one. This dialogue aims to reach his admired professor's, Watanabe Kazuo, dream. A vision to entwine both Ōe's and Japan's past and present existence:

Surrounded by the insane patriotic ardor of Japan on the eve and in the throes of the Second World War, Watanabe had a lonely dream of grafting the humanistic view of man onto the traditional Japanese sense of beauty and sensitively to nature, which fortunately had not been entirely eradicated. (123)

This will be the return of the true Yamato spirit.

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