

## History, Politics and Fiction: The Role of the Novelist in Japan & Israel Ōe Kenzaburō & Amos Oz as a Case Study

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On the relation between the genre of historical writing and literature, the philosopher Menachem Brinker writes: "They never stop to stimulate one another, like our consciousnesses of the actual, possible, and virtual, which are separated and yet intertwined, inspire one another in each day of our lives".<sup>i</sup>

Brinker's conclusion does not resolve the discourse of the legitimacy of 'translating and utilizing' literary texts as historical sources, although it presents the complex relationship of the inseparable genres within their social-historical context. Rather, Brinker's statement instigates a further discussion of the novelists' approach and their engagement with society.

This paper presents some of the critical questions that address the role given to, and/or taken by, intellectuals in modern democratic societies. Within the context of this international symposium it examines two intellectuals, Japanese novelist Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935) and Israeli novelist Amos Oz (b. 1939).

Ōe and Oz are not confined to the perimeters of literary writing, but rather actively take part in public life through their literary undertakings. In the entirety of their writing and published works we find the personal and the political entwined, overlapping with an intertextual permeability. Using autobiographical perspective as the mainstay of their work allows each novelist to share familiar experiences with their local readers, yet creates a challenge for reaching-out to an international audience.

Ōe states that his writing is intended for Japanese readers of his generation and that he feels no obligation to non-Japanese followers. His observation, however, of Murakami Haruki's international success shows otherwise, as he states:

Murakami writes in a clear, simple Japanese style. He is translated into foreign languages and is widely read, especially in America, England, and China. He's created a place for himself in the

international literary scene in a way that Yukio Mishima and myself were not able to. It's really the first time that has happened in Japanese literature. My work has been read, but looking back I'm not sure I secured a firm readership, even in Japan. It's not a competition, but I would like to see more of my works translated into English, French, and German and secure a readership in those countries. I'm not trying to write to a mass audience, but I would like to reach people.<sup>ii</sup>

Ōe defines Japanese literature as "peripheral literature" and believes that Japanese authors should accept this definition rather than attempt to shift it towards becoming a central form. He criticizes those who, in his point of view, tried to make Japanese literature more central by writing a form of "exotic" literature. He feels that Japanese writers can play a central and important role as long as they express Japanese concern in literature of the periphery.<sup>iii</sup>

The notion of peripheral and regional perspective is showcased clearly in the open exchange letters between Ōe and Oz. They respect each-other's work and perspective and agree on several main issues as well as possible social-behavioral solutions, specifically the need for mutual understanding between people and countries. They also agree upon and the need for patience, compromise, attentiveness and the use of humor in life. However, their conclusion in regard to their own country's needs, in view of the Second World War atrocities in Hiroshima and Auschwitz, lay on two different ends of the spectrum, and it is on this topic that their discussion seems to have led to a dead-end.

Both Ōe and Oz look at themselves as individual citizens who share a feeling of concern for their country in particular, and for the world in general. Although their works displays layers of diverse voices and historical events, both try to separate their political writing from their literary one (with more or less success).

Oz's main concern regarding the role of the writer, is the use of words versus action. He believes that people still look up to the novelist as an intellectual with a vision who holds a greater authority due to one's closeness to the secrets of existence. In *Under this Blazing Light* he writes:

So even in the writing of Bialik, Brenner and Yizhar, which are alleged to have a strong, straightforward connection to the realm of events, the link between words and events is neither straightforward nor direct<sup>iv</sup>

He continues further and incorporate a quote from the poet Rachel:

Is my aim to proclaim over the whole world of literature that:

*I tell myself*

*that is all I can tell of*

*my world is as small as the world of an ant*

No. Not always. Not in every sense.<sup>v</sup>

The roots of modern Hebrew tradition can be found in the very beginning of the Zionist movement, specifically its East-European segment. The movement emerged from the vision of intellectuals and writers, among them Herzl (1860-1904), Nordau (1849-1923), Lilienblum (1843-1910) , Berdyczewski (1865-1921) and Brenner (1881-1921). These intellectuals became a model of leadership for a generation of young orthodox Jews who left their homes and broke-out to a new path. In understanding this social-historical context, one can understand that Oz's argument is not a trivial one, as he is destabilizing the significant role attributed to these legendary intellectuals leaders.

Ōe, on the other hand, feels that a writer's job is the job of a clown, a clown who can also speak of sorrows. In this respect, his two main focal points are his personal experiences with his mentally-disabled son Hikari, and his concern about Japan's future in light of Japan's past and present. Ōe refuses to accept the idea of the *zero point*, or a point of purification, *misogi* 禊 in Japanese, a concept that obliterates the past. He speaks against Japanese writers who tend to consider themselves as 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 emphasize both sides of Japan's involvement in the war: Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the one end, and the war atrocities that Japan carried out, on the other.

Between the years 1957 and 1963, Ōe focuses his work on the affects of the war on Japan. He describes the physical distraction, the humiliation of the surrender and the chaos. In 1961 he writes a story based on the 1960 assassination of the socialist party leader Asanuma Inejirō, by a right-winge youth named Yamaguchi Otoya, who was determined to kill the 'traitorous'. The attack became more sensational three weeks later when Yamaguchi committed suicide in jail leaving behind a scribble praising the emperor.

Ōe's protagonist in *Sebuntin* (*Seventeen*, 1961) is a youth who seeks a place where he would feel that he belongs, is needed, and important. He is lonely, embarrassed by his physical appearance, and has almost no social

interaction. In the same year Ōe published a sequel titled *Seiji shōnen shishu* (*A Political Youth Dies*, 1961). In these two stories Ōe uses grotesque realism and intertwines fiction with details from Yamaguchi's actual biography. In both stories the protagonist is described in oppressive and miserable details, and so is the criticism on the political right-wing. The attacks on Ōe were immediate; threatening letters were sent to his home, stones were thrown on his study room, and the phone rang day and night. The literary magazine that published the stories apologized to its readers and did not publish the final part of Ōe's second story. To Ōe's request this story remained unpublished to this day. Remarkably, there was no support from the political left-wing. Ōe was criticized for his silence against these attacks and the acceptance of the magazine's apology to its readers.

In 1987 Ōe writes:

I blamed myself that I did not handle *Seventeen* and *A Political Youth Dies* with greater skills. That is, I could have written without provoking the right wing and yet making my message more forthright. I could have done this here, done that there... such thoughts kept recurring.<sup>vi</sup>

Unlike Ōe, Oz is more successful in keeping the separation between his literary works and his political engagement. Oz defines the author's work as a sole journey, while the social-political arena is a place for joint efforts within an environment of changing coalitions. Consequently, Oz's literary works revolve mainly around his family's biography and history, and less on intense political criticism. His political engagement is more prevalent in his essay collection, public speeches and involvement with left-wing political parties. It is no surprise that Oz is being criticized by those opposing his political stance. There are, however, also those who share his political opinions but denounced him for declining the traditional role of the intellectual as a leader, and not using his public recognition and abilities within the political-governmental sphere. He is also criticized for utilizing literary and language skills within his public involvement, and for keeping his individualism; for not becoming a spokesperson of the public, or for what Berdyczewski called: *רשות היחיד ברשות הרבים* the private at the behest the public domain.

I have written stories and novels set in Jerusalem and in the kibbutz, in the medieval crusades and in Hitler's Europe. I have written about Jewish refugees, about Zionist pioneers and about the new Israelis.

I have also written articles and essays in which I have called for a compromise, grounded neither in principles nor even perhaps in justice between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs, because I have seen that who ever seeks absolute and total justice is seeking death.

My stories and my articles have often unleashed a storm of public fury against me in Israel. Some have asserted that I am harming the Zionist ideological fervor, or providing 'ammunition' for the enemy, or damaging the image of the kibbutz. Some claim that I am touching a raw nerve and inflicting unnecessary pain.

I write so as to expel evil spirits. And I write, as Natan Zach put it in one of his poems:

*this is a song about people  
about what they think, and what they want  
and what they think they want<sup>vii</sup>*

From the day of his birth, Ōe's son, Hikari, became the focal point of Ōe's work:

The birth of a handicapped first baby in my real life has continuously influenced my fictional world long after the composition of *A Personal Matter*....His existence has since illuminated the dark, deep folds of my consciousness as well as its bright sides<sup>viii</sup>

Having said that, Ōe is still active socially and politically, and does not hesitate to portray the human condition. In *Hiroshima nōto* (*Hiroshima Notes*, 1965) Ōe provides a report on his visits to Hiroshima during the assembly and conferences of the Japan Peace Movement during the years 1963-1965. This report provides a piercing intellectual study of the human nature. One can learn from this book how these visits opened a new window for Ōe, a new perspective at the world and his personal life with Hikari.

Ōe never pretends to be a part of the survivors. He maintains his outsider's position and 'otherness' while trying to give the survivors the stage. Yet again, Ōe receives harsh criticism. The main argument against his report comes from the survivors themselves, who wished to be left alone and have no interest to speak again with any reporter. Another argument was that no one speaks nor shows the people who managed to maintain a normal life, the

so-called success stories of the survivors. As one reads this book, one senses that Ōe is fascinated by the people of Hiroshima. He finds them to be representative of what he sees as the true human nature, the heroes of history and life. In the epilogue he writes:

By taking Hiroshima as the fundamental focus of my thoughts, I want to confirm that I am, above all, a Japanese writer<sup>ix</sup>

Hiroshima became a world symbol, and Ōe wishes for us to remember its people, and not just the symbol. In order to further elaborate on this point I would diverge here from the literary discourse and shortly examine the commemoration of the Second World War victims in both Japan and Israel.

Two of the main museums for the victims of the Second World War are located in Jerusalem and in Hiroshima, each commemorating the atrocities of the war. While visiting the museums one cannot overlook their very different nature. We can begin by examining the name chosen for each museum: Hiroshima's *Peace Memorial Museum* - is a name representing the change that took place in Japan after the war, and the longing for peace. The Jerusalem museum's name *Yad Vashem* (The origin of the name is from a Biblical verse: "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (Yad Vashem) that shall not be cut off") represents a wish to remember each name and each person as an individual. This is not only a semantic issue. The content of the exhibitions in these two museums is a direct reflection of their names: in Hiroshima the main exhibition floor portrays the damage of the A-bomb, its enormous power and vast destruction. While in *Yad Vashem* the focus is on the stories and life of each individual.

In their exchange letters, Ōe and Oz refer to these differences of remembrance: they debate whether and how the symbols of Hiroshima and Auschwitz are engraved within our consciousness.

This paper is unfortunately too short to discuss all various aspects of the role of the intellectual, and particularly the novelist, in the modern democratic societies of Israel and Japan. I do hope that I was able to shed light onto some of the challenges that both Ōe and Oz are and have faced, while opening some of the debates and questions from the reader's perspective.

I would like to conclude with a last quote of Ōe's. In a reply to the question whether after more than thirty years of writing and speaking up, he thinks his efforts are effective:

No, I do not think the world has changed a bit due to my deeds.  
Still I will keep on writing and criticizing.

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- i M. Brinker, *Sovev sifrut: Ma'amarim al gvol haphilosophiya vetorat hasifrut veva'amanut*, The Hebrew University, Magnes Press, p.320. 2000 (My translation from the Hebrew)
- ii Interviewed by Sarah Fay, in: *The Paris Review Ōe Kenzaburō, The art of fiction No. 195*, Winter 2010. Retrieved from [www.the-parisreview.org/interviews/5816/the-art-of-fiction-no-195-kenzaburo-oe](http://www.the-parisreview.org/interviews/5816/the-art-of-fiction-no-195-kenzaburo-oe)
- iii K. Ishiguro & O. Kenzaburo, "The novelist in today's world: A conversation", in: *Boundary 2*, Vol. 18, Japan in the world, Autumn, p.119. 1991
- iv A. Oz, *Under this blazing light*, Cambridge University Press, p. 17. 1995
- v Ibid, p.18
- vi K. Oe, *Two novels: Seventeen & J*, New York, pp. viii. 2000
- vii A. Oz, *Under this blazing light*, Cambridge University Press, p. 172. 1995
- viii M. N. Wilson, *The marginal world of Oe Kenzaburo*, New York & London, p.6. 1986
- ix K. Oe, *Hiroshima Notes*, Grove Press, p.180. 1996