

## *Ambiguous Japan: A Study on Four Lectures of Nobel Prize Winner Kenzaburō Ōe*

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### **Abstract**

In 1994, Kenzaburō Ōe, second Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, entitled his Nobel Lecture “Japan, the ambiguous, and myself”, dialoguing with his predecessor, Yasunari Kawabata, whose Nobel Lecture was entitled “Japan, the beautiful, and myself”. Confessing his quest for “ways to be of some use in the cure and reconciliation of mankind”, Ōe proposes a reflection about Japan’s role in the world by that time, having ascended by its technology, but not by its literature or philosophy. His Nobel Lecture aligns with other three lectures in different places and contexts: “Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian audience” (1992), “On modern and contemporary Japanese Literature” (San Francisco, 1990) and “Japan’s dual identity: a writer’s dilemma” (1986). This paper attempts to reflect on the writer’s perspectives expressed in his lectures, focusing in the following subjects: Japanese culture and identity, Japan between past and future and the contributions of literature in the achievement of peace.

Keywords: Ambiguity. Japanese literature. Kenzaburō Ōe.

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## Introduction

When I first had the chance to read one of Kenzaburō Ōe's stories, I was still an undergraduate student of Japanese Language and Literature. The first one I read, *Tori* ("The birds"), from the book *Miru mae ni tobe* ("Leap before you look"), let me so uncomfortable, so uneasy, and fascinated me in a very particular way. Those haunting birds really left an impression on me. The second time I had the chance to read one of Ōe's literary works was when I had in hands the novel *Kojinteki na taiken* ("A personal matter"), whose protagonist was nicknamed "Bird" – a very appropriate term for a young man struggling with a difficult marriage, wanting to fly to Africa with an ex-girlfriend, wishing for freedom, but feeling the responsibility of raising a mentally disabled son. The "personal matter" is indeed personal, also for the autobiographical strokes in the novel, but it reaches everyone in the sense that it deals with freedom and decisions.

A few years later, randomly checking books on Japanese Literature at my University's library, I found "Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures", with four speeches/lectures by Kenzaburō Ōe. The four speeches it brings are not chronologically organized, but placed in a crescendo that culminates with the Nobel Prize Speech "Japan, the ambiguous, and myself", the broadest known of the four, in which Ōe builds his reflections by referring to Yasunari Kawabata's speech "Japan, the beautiful, and myself". The word he uses in Japanese is *aimai-na*, formed by two ideograms whose meaning is "dark", "obscure". One could say that "ambiguous" does not express exactly this idea, being based in Greek suffix *ambi-*, that means "two", and not exactly "dark", "unclear". This is a point of view, but in fact Ōe shows a Japan whose obscurity lies on doubles: traditional *versus* modern, spiritualistic *versus* materialistic, a country ascending in the international community *versus* a country having problems in relating to its Asian neighbors etc.

Ōe has given many different speeches, in other occasions and places. These four are somehow aligned, mainly presenting confessions about Ōe's authentic worries as a writer: "Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian audience" (1992), "On modern and contemporary Japanese Literature" (San Francisco, 1990), "Japan's dual identity: a writer's dilemma" (1986) and "Japan, the ambiguous, and myself" (1994). Here we will refer to these speeches by the order they appear in the book (first to third and the Nobel Prize speech), reflecting on some of Ōe's perspectives as shown in these lectures, focusing in three main lines: Japanese culture and identity, Japan between past and future and the contributions of literature in the achievement of peace, as follows.

### Japanese culture and identity

Every time one is to study the topics related to Japanese culture and identity there is an expression that inevitably comes to mind: the term *nihonjinron* (or "theory of being Japanese"). It is an emblematic expression that refers to the works of a wide range of writers and scholars, either from Japan or not. Some questions, then, have to be raised: what are the opinions of a Japanese writer, for example, from the beginning of the 19th century? How do they compare to those of a foreign writer from the post-

war period? It is a very complex theme, not only because of variations of space, time and perspective, but also because it deals with society, religion, history, philosophy, politics, economy, international relations and much more.

Ōe mentions *nihonjinron* in his second speech, “On modern and contemporary Japanese Literature”, when he brings to the audience the character Daisuke, the intellectual hero of the novel *Sorekara* (“And then”), written by Natsume Sōseki, “the national writer of Japan”, in 1909. Through the voice of this main character, Sōseki criticized Japan of that time, but his criticism “was not just leveled at Japan’s economic pursuit of the West; he criticized the basic conditions of life as well (like the shabbiness of human dwellings), which had actually deteriorated in the process of modernization” (Ōe, 1995, p. 45). Like a man in search of himself, gazing at others and comparing himself to them, Japan from the Meiji period stares at the outside and tries to learn not only what the foreign world is and how it works but also what it means to be Japan in such a big world. In the first speech, “Speaking on Japanese culture before a Scandinavian audience”, Ōe also mentions Sōseki and his “prophetic voice” in Daisuke, yet affirming that, even though Japan has reached the same level of other economic potencies of the West, the “balance between appetites and morality” was not achieved, and has become even worse (p. 25). Pessimistic? Realistic? How far can pessimism go from realism when things turn bad indeed?

Even though *nihonjinron* has become a popular subject after the end of World War II, it started earlier, for the contact with the foreign is obviously older. Takeo Funabiki (2014), a specialist in *nihonjinron*, says that “reflecting about Japan is to reflect about the differences between Japan and other countries” (p. 92). First, Japan (or Yamato, that is to say the name of Japan in its very beginning) was in contact with Korea and China; in the 16th century, with the arrival of Portuguese merchants (and a little after with Spanish, Dutch, English and others), the contact with the foreigners was intensified. The *sakoku jidai*, or the “era of the closed country”, from 1633 to 1858, was a period of endogenous development of arts and literature in Japan. After this period, Japan was initially compelled to establish relations with other countries, but this compelling seems to have soon turned into fascination, especially regarding Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup> As Ōe writes, “Japan’s modernization reveals the history of an Asian country that sought to extricate itself from Asia and become a European-style nation” (p. 55). This fascination survived the enmities of the great world wars as, for instance, Japan even imported the “American way of life” during the 50’s/60’s.

The beginning of Japan is usually traced back to the formation of Yamato, as in the expression *Yamato damashii*. *Yamato damashii* is a very well-known expression whose meaning, according to Ōe, depends on the era: in his first speech he reminds of Genji supporting his son Yugiri in going to the university: “Only after we have had enough of book learning (...) can we bring our Yamato spirit into full play” (p. 17). Ōe understands the Yamato spirit in the Heian period was a “shared sensibility”. Throughout Meiji period, however, the expression has changed its meaning, or at least its use: it started to turn into a slogan for imperialist Japan, “to unify the people’s

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors, like Takeo Funabiki, question the widely accepted interpretation according to which Japan was forced to reopen the seaports to foreign ships (2014, p. 103).

consciousness in the interests of creating a modern state” (Ōe, 1995, p. 19). Then, in a fanatic wave, Japan might have lost the tracks of the shared sensibility that could really bind the whole country together.

It was also in the Meiji period that the idea of *wakonkansai* was substituted by the one of *wakon'yōsai* (p. 20). Both expressions are made of *wakon* (the ideograms of *Yamato* and *tamashii*); the difference between them is just what is to be accompanied to the Japanese Spirit: Chinese studies (*kansai*) or studies of the West (*yōsai*). Either way this spirit is not alone: it refers to something else to be taken as a parallel. Once again citing Funabiki's work, it is necessary to stress that, in the exercise of a reflection about Japan there is necessarily a comparison between Japan and other countries. The Meiji period just witnessed the change of the object in the comparison.

But how is it after the war and after Japan's recovery? Ōe is not conveying an ultranationalist defense of traditional Yamato culture: he is obviously aware of Japan's role in a globalized world, ready to cooperate and share, as he says:

“What Europeans and Americans should clearly see is a Japan possessing a view of the world richly shaped by both traditional and foreign cultural elements; and a will to work as a cooperative member of the world community, to make an independent and distinctive contribution to the environment of our shared planet” (p. 54)

The importance given to the group relations, as testified in notions like *uchi* (the inside; my group) and *soto* (the outside; the others), is clear in Japanese culture. For foreigners who study the Japanese language, it can be very hard to learn how to master the honorific language, for example, and other marks of this feature in language as a cultural material. Notwithstanding, it is not a matter of us (from Japanese perspective) *against* them (other countries). And it is not a naïve conception of world harmony either: it sounds like an enlarged conception of *uchi* – we are all members of the big group of international community, after all. We are part of the same world and definitely somehow linked. Of course it brings new insights to the development of *nihonjinron* in the present. Ōe also believes that this Japanese group psychology is in crisis, since Japanese homogeneity is being questioned, for reasons like the fact that the number of foreigners living in Japan has significantly increased (Bradbury, Pease, Wilson & Kenzaburō, 1993, p. 9).

### **Japan between past and future**

As prof. Shuichi Katō (2012, p. 18) says in his work, Japan lives for the present. Japanese language does not even have a future tense – it does not mean, however, that the sense of future, or *mirai*, is weaker than in other cultures. It is just a matter of focusing on now rather than in yesterday or tomorrow. This feeling pervades all Japanese culture. In the present, past and future are incorporated/anticipated. In the third speech, Ōe (1995) defends that the role of literature “is to create a model of a contemporary age which encompasses past and future, a model of the people living in that age as well” (p. 66).

In the first line of the same speech, he writes: “I come to you today as one Japanese writer who feels that Japanese literature may be decaying” (p. 59). In his second

speech, he advocates that there is a decline in “serious literature” and “literary readership”, because, as a matter of market, to meet the needs of contemporary readers – or, should we say, consumers – there has been more offer of what Ōe calls sheer entertainment, *manga* included in this category (p. 49). He addresses severe critics to some of the most popular Japanese novelists, like Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto. In his words,

“Murakami and Yoshimoto convey the experience of a youth politically uninvolved or disaffected, content to exist within a late adolescent or post-adolescent subculture. And their work evokes a response bordering on adulation in their young readers. But it is too early to predict where this trend will lead as they grow older.” (p. 50)

The word “adulation” might sound heavy, but it reflects exactly Ōe’s idea that recently famous writers are prioritizing what their readers like or want to read, and not what they need to. Ōe acknowledges that Murakami is an intellectual writer of the same range of Sōseki e Ooka, “yet Murakami, in capturing an extremely wide and avid readership, has accepted what had hitherto been beyond the reach of other genuinely intellectual writers (...)” (p. 51). For Ōe, postwar Japanese literature, unique in its mission, was the very best representation of *junbungaku*, or “pure literature”, since the writers of the time were strongly committed to “enlighten Japanese people”.<sup>2</sup>

Here it is necessary to pose some questions: from 1994, the year when Ōe won the Nobel Prize, until today, what has changed? Can we agree with his words, or may we reassess them? For example, in 2002 Haruki Murakami published his novel *Umibe no Kafuka* (“Kafka on the shore”); even though there are elements of pop culture in this book (Johnny Walker, Colonel Saunders, a lot of musical references and so on), it might not be considered a light work for sheer entertainment, to use Ōe’s own words. It is a very intriguing story that dialogues not only with other literatures, Franz Kafka’s works being the most evident ones along with Sophocles’ Ōedipus myth, but also with Japanese literature, bringing back Sōseki’s *Koufu* (“The Miner”) and Murasaki Shikibu’s *Genji Monogatari* (“The Tale of Genji”). Besides, Haruki Murakami – and maybe we can extend this impression to other contemporary writers – seems to condemn any label, *junbungaku* included (Stretcher, 1998, p. 354).

Beyond Japanese literature and the discussion on what can be considered *junbungaku* or not, continues the debate on what art – and, more precisely, literature – is, and what it is for. In spite of the fact that Ōe is being coherent to his own understanding of what the role of literature is, it is necessary to ponder the presence and use of mass media in the postwar period, in the early 90’s (when Ōe writes the speeches), and furthermore, bring this analysis to the present moment. Besides, the idea that popular/best-selling is opposed to intellectual/sophisticated urges to be relativized. Thinking of an example in Japanese culture, maybe the Kabuki theatre can help us visualize what is there for relativization. Kabuki, from the word *kabuku* (“to be strange, extravagant”), started with public performances for commoners, mostly in leisure quarters; as time went by, the genre became more and more sophisticated, but it did not lose its popular appeal.

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<sup>2</sup> The term *junbungaku*, “pure” or “sincere literature”, was first used by Tokoku Kitamura. Presently, it is understood as literature that does not accept dictated influences from mass media. As Oe (1995) defines it, it is “literature that is not ‘popular’ or ‘mundane’” (p. 66).

Even though some say that Kabuki has lost its strength and does not attract young people anymore, it is possible to see recent performances that, mostly using mass media, not only enrich the genre but also help disseminate it.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, the whole debate can be put down if we get “lost in translation”: the opposition of *jun* (“pure”) and *taishū* (“mass”) does not exactly correspond to the opposition of “serious” and “popular” as already carved in Western tradition (Stretcher, 1998, p. 355).

### **Contributions of literature in the achievement of peace**

Ōe grieves for Japanese literature. His worries are patent in many of his works, interviews and lectures. Just as the examples of writers he cites in his speeches (especially in the third one), Ōe’s writing militancy is embedded in the conscience of the effects of literature in society:

“I suppose my only regret is that my writing, in the sense that it is an act of resistance against reactionary tendencies in postwar Japan, has not had sufficient power to push back a rising tide of conformity.” (p. 38)

Even though he acknowledges his resistance is not enough, he stands for a task that could not be performed by any other: a philosopher, a historian, an anthropologist, a social scientist, a psychologist, they would all work with their own tools, their own expertise. Only a writer can do what a writer does, and it is to cause people to become better through literature. In fact, literature does not depend on economy or politics to do what it does. Referring to the years 1945-1960, right after the war, Ōe says: “... while people had the greatest difficulty satisfying their material needs, the moral issues they found addressed in the literature of the time were at their highest tide” (p. 47)

Even though his view of literature is conceived under the labels of “pure” and “mass”, in a somewhat conservative way, his political view is liberal and he has done much more than just showing his ideas in his writings. Ōe believes strongly that the writer has to accomplish a social responsibility (Stretcher, 1998, p. 372) and has used his influence, for example, participating in anti-nuclear protests in 2011 and 2012. Two works of his, *Hiroshima nōto* (“Hiroshima notes”) and *Okinawa nōto* (“Okinawa notes”), published in 1965 and 1970 respectively, address two delicate situations, in both political and moral terms: the condition of the nuclear bomb victims after 1945 and the oppressive treatment towards Okinawa and its people. Even though his activity is linked to problems that are peculiar to Japan, he closes his Nobel Prize speech with a message that could fit any engaged writer of any place or time:

“As one with a peripheral, marginal, off-center existence in the world, I would like to continue to seek – with what I hope is a modest, decent, humanistic contribution of my own – ways to be of some use in the cure and reconciliation of mankind” (p. 128). A noble desire of a Nobel Prize winner – I wonder if we, writers and literature lovers, can relate to it, not in a naïve sprout of self-confidence, but, taking a grasp on Japanese *junbungaku*, with a pure, sincere desire of engaging in the task. Ōe’s

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples are Kirk Nishikawa Dixon’s performance in the film “The lion”, 2014 Grand Prize Winner in the Mill Valley Film Festival, and Nico-nico’s Chō-Kabuki, where the vocaloid Hatsune Miku performed with Kabuki actor Shidō Nakamura (2016 and 2017).

resistance is for values that “will remain unexpressed if not given a voice by the writer” (Katō, 1997, p. 351). Whatever literature he writes, may it be fiction or non-fiction, he states the commitment, implicitly or not, to what he understands the role of literature really is.

## **Conclusion**

Even though ambiguity itself must not be considered strictly a good or bad quality, Japanese ambiguity as suggested by Ōe can show a path to conflict: traditional and modern are often in frank opposition, and so are spiritual and material prosperity. In the international community, Japan has already reached a comfortable status, but still has some particular problems, mostly from historical roots, towards the Asian neighbors.

When referring to Kawabata’s speech, Ōe comments on two possible translations to the Japanese particle *no* in his title: “Japan, the beautiful, and myself” (revealing the idea of Japan and the writer juxtaposed) and “myself as a part of beautiful Japan” (p. 111). He does not indicate which one is more appropriate, simply pointing out that the title has two different ways of reading. Similarly, if we keep the same understanding for Ōe’s own speech’s title, we can read it as either “Japan, the ambiguous, and myself” or “myself as a part of ambiguous Japan”. In his third speech, entitled “Japan’s dual identity: a writer’s dilemma”, he had already testified that he hoped “to be able to overcome the ambiguities” (p. 63). As a matter of fact, the ambiguities he shares in his speeches are associated to Japan but also affect the writer (not only Ōe, but every Japanese writer, broadly speaking), in the sense that he is inside the context, being a part of Japan. These ambiguities are stressed in the studies of Japanese culture and identity, in the study of contemporary Japan and also in the quest for what contributions literature can give in the achievement of peace, in a local or global aspect. Ōe, as a “part of ambiguous Japan”, responded – and still responds – to what he understands his mission is.

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