

Father, Where Are You Going: The Image of Father in Ōe Kenzaburō's Short Stories

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Abstract:

The father-son relationship is a recurring theme in Kenzaburō Ōe's works. In his short story collection *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, Ōe portrays several alienated and alienating fathers, which challenge the traditional images of the father. The aim is to explore the image of the father in this collection of stories in relation to their cultural and historical background. By using an existentialist approach and new historicism, this study demonstrates that the portrait of the father is connected to Ōe's traumatic experience in his personal life and reflects post-war Japanese society.

Keywords: Japan, Ōe Kenzaburō, father, son, family, Second World War, Japan in the Second World War, father-son relationships, existentialism, new historicism

Ōe Kenzaburō, the winner of the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature, is a major figure in contemporary Japanese literature. Most of his works deal with political, social, and philosophical issues by describing family and personal matters, and expressing the disillusionment and rebellion of the post-war generation. His writings have prompted much discussion among readers on a wide range of subjects. As Ōe commented, “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” (Claremont 46). Family is a microcosm of society, and difficult or morbid relationships, which are a permanent feature in his early works, are one of the most important themes. The father in Ōe's works usually challenges the traditional image of the father who is supposed to be protective and fatherly. Rather, Ōe's characters seem to have difficulties establishing a close relationship within the family. After the Second World War, people's mindset had been much influenced. Literature, as a vehicle for the representation of

history, does contain insights into the formation of historical moments. Besides, Japanese culture has also contributed to the tough situation.

Many studies have been done about father and son relationships in Ōe's works, but there have been few that focus on the image of father. This paper is to explore and analyze the image of father in Ōe's short stories using an existentialist approach and new historicism. The materials of the paper are three novellas from Ōe: *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away*, *Prize Stock*, and *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*. An existentialist approach will be utilized to analyze and understand the way in which the characters experience and deal with loneliness and alienation. New historicism will also be used to study Ōe's portrayal of the father in historical context, and to explore politics, class, and power distribution in his works.

Keiko Kobayashi discusses William Blake's influences on Ōe's writing. He identifies two forms of the influences: one is the overwhelming evocative power of the polysemous fragments to inspire Ōe; the other is Blake's various themes with his own central preoccupation, such as father and son, family, and brotherhood. Yasuko Claremont, in her book *The Novels of Ōe Kenzaburō*, talks about the themes of shame, freedom, isolation, and existentialism in Ōe's works. She also points out that Ōe focuses instinctively on negative attitudes in the human personality as described by Sartre. Cynthia Naomi Moss analyzes the father and son relationship from a historical and political perspective. In relation to the history and Japan's international standing and prestige, she compares the father's obesity to Japan's historical baggage. Finally, Reiko Tachibana focuses on power relations in the story. Contrasting the administrative subdivisions of governmental power in the US and Japan, Tachibana shows that the Emperor's image and words are used as an instrument of control over the lives of the people and their enemies.

Ōe was born in 1935 in Ōse, a mountain village on the island of Shikoku. He was the third son of seven children. In 1944, Ōe's father was killed in the Pacific War. The experience of losing his father in early childhood has had a great influence on his early works, especially those about family relationships. When Kenzaburō Ōe was 28, and already a cult writer for Japan's postwar youth, his first child was born in 1963 with a herniated brain pushing out of his skull, the "two-headed monster baby" of Ōe's later fiction ("Japan - Kenzaburō Ōe"). As a child, Ōe had few experiences of talking with his father; as a father, he is unable to establish a dialogue connection with his mentally-handicapped son. Thus, loneliness and the sense of powerlessness is all over his works about the father and son relationship.

In Ōe's novella *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*, he focuses on the relationship between a mentally handicapped son and an obese father. In the short story, the father, who is called "the fat man", gives the child the name Mori, which means "forest" in Japanese. The forest has multiple meanings in Japan's culture and history. The concept of forest, or trees, is usually associated with death, rebirth, and the cycle of life. It implies the inseparable connection between father and son. To avoid embarrassment, he gives his son the nickname Eeyore from *Winnie the Pooh*, which seems to create a barrier between the child and society. Ōe, in his book *Rouse Up O Young Men of the New Age!*, explains that his writing about Eeyore is inspired by Blake's poem *Father, Where Are You Going*:

Father! father! where are you going?

O do not walk so fast

Speak, father, speak to your little boy

Or else I shall be lost. (126)

It seems the poem is narrated from the perspective of a helpless child; however, it can also be understood as the father's longing to protect his little boy. The father assumes a role of a passive victim and drops out of society to look after his son. He takes his son to a Chinese restaurant for pork noodles and Pepsi-Cola every day, which is intended to introduce Eeyore to the pleasure of eating and then satisfy the father's own feelings.

The fat man has imagined an intimate relationship between himself and his son. By touching hands, the father believes he can feel his son's pain, and even relieve it, and help calm his son's blind panic. This portrayal contributes to a co-existing relationship. Finally, the fat man gives up his wishful thinking. He allows his wife to get glasses for Eeyore and enroll him in an institution. Once the fat man realizes that he is free, he succumbs to a "miserable loneliness": "[a]s a result, the fat man was released from the fetters of an old obsession, but the minute he found himself free a miserable loneliness rose in him and withered his already slender spirit" (*Teach Us* 130).

From an existentialist perspective, the father's behavior fits the existential theme of bad faith, which means the flight from oneself. According to Sartre, the cause of bad faith is the refusal to acknowledge absolute freedom in an amoral universe where all perceived reality dissolves into nothingness (50). The father willingly gives up his freedom and takes up his role as a "mirror" of his son. As he fails to live in bad faith, he comes back to "miserable loneliness" (131). The mother's indifference also aggravates the fat man's loneliness. The mother, who is almost absent and silent throughout the story, is unwilling to communicate with the other family members. She even denies the existence of the fat man's father. Shame, desperation, and rage caused by war have been transferred to the rejection of the people involved in the war.

With the dropping of the atomic bomb, everything changed. Psychologically, people's beliefs fell apart because of the Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. Individualism and existentialism become prevalent, and the basis for moral authority lies solely with the individual. Physically, millions of Japanese people face health threats. Many of Ōe's works address the marginal group that suffer from disease. He zooms in on their loneliness and trauma, to seek “a peripheral, marginal and off-centre existence in the world” and contribute to “a cure and reconciliation of mankind” (“Nobel Lecture”).

Another novella regarding loneliness in father/son relationships is *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away*, a complex story about a dying man. The story takes place in a hospital where the narrator is staying. Lying in bed, he begins to dictate recollections of his childhood in an isolated village in the forest. He recalls the “happy days” (*Teach Us* 24) spent with his nationalist father who used to be part of an anti-Tojo movement in Manchuria; after the Kanzo army fails, he returns to his village in the forest and begins to live in a storehouse next to the family home, which isolates himself from the outside world. The boy brings meals to his father and tries to build a connection with his father. The mother becomes indifferent to her husband after her other son is killed in Manchuria. In the family, all members seem to stay alienated from one another. Though the son attempts to enter the father's world, he is unable to establish a closer relationship because of his inability to understand his father. The lack of communication is obvious, primarily because they lack the information of one another's stories. The father's rejection of the protagonist makes the son feel ashamed and embarrassed. Although he consistently recalls the “happy days” spent with his father, the feelings toward his father are ambivalent. On the night he is drunk, he stands by his mother's bed and speaks to her:

Mother, you and I are the sole survivors here, we must marry secretly and have many children and strangle the abnormal fruit of our incestuous marriage while they are still mewling infants and keep only the hale and healthy and provide for the prosperity of our heirs and thus, Mother, we must make amends for having killed *a certain party*.
(*Teach Us* 38)

The son's words reveal the Oedipus Complex in his unconsciousness. Nevertheless, it is not simply the Oedipus idea to kill his father and marry his mother. The idea to kill "a certain party" (*Teach Us* 18), which refers to his father, corresponds to his father's idea to kill the Emperor. In this way, family tensions are translated into social-political tensions. The political themes will be discussed in the last section. Another significant point is that the narrative of the story consists of two voices, the son's and the mother's, which makes the father's role blank and his image more alienated.

For existentialism, according to Sartre, the goal of bad faith is to put oneself out of reach; it is an escape by which a person can deny himself and take refuge in a sphere where one is no longer anything but a pure regard. The father chooses to be a defeated man, with quite limited freedom, no longer able to act. Claremont argues that in this story all three family members "find a path to what they perceive as freedom; father and son immerse themselves in their separate roles, giving allegiance to the Emperor. Yet, they remain 'being what I am not'; self-destruction is their only fate" (51).

The father, in many of Ōe's works, represents the power and authority of a cruel adult world. The short story *Prize Stock* centers around two figures, a Japanese boy Frog and a black American pilot, and at the same time addresses the difficult relationship between the father and the child. The story takes place in a small, isolated rural village in Japan during the Second

World War. The narrator Frog and his younger brother live with their taciturn father. One night the peace of village is broken by a black soldier. Frog wants to rear the soldier like an animal, while the adults, including his father, view the black man as dangerous and finally kill him, regardless of Frog's safety.

The focus of *Prize Stock* is on the narrator Frog and the black soldier, while such is Ōe's ingenuity that all the subordinate characters surround them like pieces on a chessboard, highlighting their powerlessness and the horror they contemplate. The connection and relationship between Frog and the soldier is easily broken by the powerful group, which in this case refers to Frog's father and the villagers.

Japan is well-known for its strong sense of cooperation and nationalist sentiment, especially during the Second World War. The father, in the case of *Prize Stock*, represents the powerful party that forces Frog to obey and assimilate to the social framework. By the end of the story, he does call the black airman a “nigger”(Teach Us 129), and this signals the end of childhood, a loss of innocence, and a tragic assimilation.

The traditional family hierarchy in Japan, which places the father, who controls economics, at the top, also contributes to the father's unchallengeable authority. The small village, as well as Frog's family, shows a subset of the dichotomy between adult and child, which emphasizes the hierarchy and power relationship of the community. Frog's father, is endowed with great power and authority. From Frog's perspective, he and his brother are like “small seeds deeply embedded in thick flesh and tough, outer skin, green seeds soft and fresh and encased in membrane that would shiver and slough away at the first exposure to light” (*Teach Us* 97). While the father, is like “a beast lurking in the forest night about to spring upon his prey, his eyes bright with desire and his body tense” (*Teach Us* 98). The description is the

foreshadow of the story's ending. Though Michiko Niikuni Wilson claims that the spirit of defiance against the image of the absolute father is one of the major themes woven through Ōe's opus, in most cases, the children are too powerless to protest and revolt.

In *Prize Stock*, the father manifests his authority by keeping silent and being indifferent towards his children. His behaviour, like shooting rabbits, birds, wild boar, also contribute to his cruel, offish, and fascist image. In many instances, Ōe describes how the father prepares meals for Frog and his brother without communicating with them, which makes it seem that the father is rearing his children rather than raising them. When Frog asks if the soldier is dangerous, and if he can continue rearing him, his father “rejected him with silence” (*Teach Us* 105). Silence, according to Foucault, is a way to exercise power (46). The father establishes his authority without claiming it, since patriarchy is rooted in ideology, society, and culture.

Like many of Ōe's novels, Frog's mother is absent throughout the story, which leaves the binary father and son relationship, contributing to the image of the “absolute father”. Similarly, it seems that the whole village is like a dystopia without women. The adult villagers, who go hunting with guns, seem full of masculinity. From the description we can get a Spartan image of the village. Without femininity and the sense of childhood, the village becomes the society only for manhood, with the features of cruelty, violence, and callousness.

Frog has experienced the disillusionment and corruption through the process of “rearing the black man” (*Teach Us* 23). The relationship between the black soldier and Frog parallels the relationship between Frog and his father. The name Frog also refers to an animal, which implies the similarity. From the new historical perspective, literary works may not directly tell us about various factual aspects of the histories from which they emerge, but they

will tell us about prevailing ways of thinking and ideas of social organization at the time. The moment Frog is taken by captive by the soldier, he begins to understand that one of the ways in which human beings define their existence is through the abuse of others. And it seems that only by abusing the black man can Frog get rid of the shameful feeling being alienated. Japanese military culture was popular during the Second World War because of political propaganda. Nationalist sentiment encouraged teenagers to fight and sacrifice themselves for their nation. The violence and atrocities committed were praised in order to encourage young Japanese to volunteer for the Special Attack Corps and instill a desire in the youth to die for the nation (Earhart 596-572).

Many of Ōe's stories are set in such small villages in the forest, where the residents seem able to keep themselves free of wars and live a pastoral life. However, with certain incidents, a contradiction is gradually exposed. The administrative divisions of the village reflects the power distribution in Japan's society. In the case of *Prize Stock*, the power relation manifests itself by villagers' absolute obedience and village/town relationship. As Tachibana comments:

This apparent socioeconomic dichotomy between town and village, however, is under the sway of a more influential power: the prefecture. The control of Japan by Occupation forces constituted a situation in which people lived with constant feelings of shame and the humiliating need to defer to others to make decisions or authorize actions (43).

In these structured power relationships, Frog's father plays a role as the implementer of power's exercises. The father's power is not only enhanced by patriarchal family relationship, but also by his role in society.

Politically, first, the image of father is associated with Mikado-worship in Japanese society. Mikado, in Japanese, means Emperor. The Second World War broke out in 1939, when Ōe was four. Militaristic education extended to every nook and cranny of the country, which defined the Mikado as both monarch and a living god who reigned over Japan's politics and culture. At that time, Mikado-worship permeated all Japan's society. From 1931 onward, Japan pursued totalitarianism and military expansionism in the name of the Emperor: the takeover of Manchuria, the establishment of East Asia co-prosperity, aggression toward Asian colonies, and the attack on Pearl Harbor. As required by the imperial education edict, on a daily basis, Ōe and his peers in the village had to answer questions like, "If the Emperor commands you to die, what will you do?". The expected reply was, "I will die happily". As Ōe recalls, he was traumatized by this forced ritual (Wilson).

The novella *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away* is famous for questioning the Mikado system. The father in the story is a fat man with bladder cancer, who looks a little awkward and ludicrous. The impressive image that the father sacrifices himself for the Emperor and contributes to Japan's resurgence makes the son conflate the Father and Emperor. And therefore, the concept of family and nationalism are connected. The father becomes the *de facto* emperor of the family. When the Emperor conceded defeat and brought the Pacific War to a close, the father and a group of students plan to blow up the Emperor's palace in order to restore the Emperor's divinity. The plot is quite similar to that of Ōe's other novel *Death by Water*, in which the father kills himself after he fails to blow up the Emperor's palace. The similar plots of killing the Emperor make the image of emperor as well as the father symbolic. Through the desperately patriotic images of the father, Ōe explores the influence of Mikado-worship and questions its existence. According to Ōe, Japan's surrender released

conflicting emotions: a sense of both humiliation/subjugation and liberation/renewal. To a degree, the father's thoughts represents the old worship of the emperor system. Ōe has expressed his hatred of and questioned the Emperor System in public many times. In his view, the Emperor System prevents the Japanese people from thinking independently and critically: "I feel what has been suppressing the arts and the minds of the masses of Japan today is nothing other than the Emperor System" (Kushner). Having an imperial father figure makes Japanese citizens into children who never question the rules. Ōe's belief in self determination and his existential resistance to conformism lead to an immense distaste of Emperor worship and the sheeplike people who buy into it. After the father dies, the protagonist - the son - becomes a lunatic and alienated from society. It seems he inherits his father's craziness and becomes the embodiment of his father's voice, which implies the endless destructive influence of the Emperor worship.

Second, regarding Japan's history, the father and son relationship parallels the international relationship. Ōe is concerned by Japan's relationship with its neighbouring countries, and expresses his worries in his works. As a master of symbolism through his technique of layering metaphorical meaning in his text, Ōe uses both identifiable Sartrean symbolism and Japanese symbols in his work. Moss comments,

The titular story of the collection *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* demonstrates his use of Japanese symbols. One of Ōe's recurring themes is an outlandishly fat man as the father of a slender young boy, often the narrator. The fat man symbolizes Japan's historical baggage, carried about because it is impossible to be rid of it. (29)

After the Second World War, Japan tucked into the shadow of the US, and began to slowly reestablish its economic power and international relations. However, its neighbors, like China

and Korea, were suspicious of Japanese movements, like 1947's Peace Constitution, viewing Japanese growth as a threat. As Moss suggests, the challenge of communication and the complicated relationship between the fat man and the slender boy reflects that between Japan and the rest of Asia (30).

Moreover, the portrayal of the father can be interpreted as the portrayal of Western countries, especially of America. Japan's history is somewhat unique as it has been both colonizer and colonized, although it was never technically colonized in the political sense. Japan has been long influenced by other cultures, such as Chinese culture in the early times and Western culture in the modern times, through which it has developed its own hybrid culture.

America during the Second World War and the figure of the father in Ōe's works, share many characteristics. They are both aggressive, authoritative, and powerful. And the trauma of the war makes the father/son, America/Japan relationship more complicated and difficult. In *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away*, the mother complains about her husband:

Do you know he's made me promise over again and again that I'll take our child and marry an American when he dies! He even went out and found an American deserter. We kept him at home for a long time as a member of the family, and a number of times he pretended to get drunk and started carrying on, trying to make me seduce the American. He hopes that if his child becomes an American citizen his own blood will be freed from both the emperor and the ghosts of the name of_. (*Teach Us* 91)

Here, the father wishes an American could be his son's second father so that the child with his blood could be freed. The father's image and America are combined. Similar to the view of the father, Japan's attitude towards America is also ambivalent. On the one hand, they are afraid of

its political and military power. On the other hand, they still consider American superior and ultimate idols, and can never get rid of its cultural and political influences.

The father's image in Ōe's literary works is always related to negative themes. Wilson comments that, “[h]is lifelong ambivalence regarding the 'father image' is rooted in this pre-war ideological indoctrination centered on the divine Emperor who neither saw, heard, nor spoke to his loyal subjects”. Therefore, the reader is supposed to put the image in historical context when analyzing it. A writer's works reflect his personal experience, values, and insights into history. Ōe has experienced personal frustration and witnessed the huge change of Japan; as he said, “As I grew up, I was continually to suffer hardships in different realms of life - in my family, in my relationship to Japanese society and in my way of living at large in the latter half of the twentieth century” (200). However, Ōe transfers his personal experiences and concerns with Japan into literature. A writer's task is just like Tagore's poem: “The world has kissed my soul with its pain, asking for its return in songs” (Tagore 415).

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