

# THE WORLD OF OZ

I wish my work as a novelist', declares Kenzaburo Oe, 'to help both those who express themselves in words and their readers to overcome their own sufferings and the sufferings of their time and to cure their souls of their wounds'. (p. 127). This statement, which has the force of a solemn declaration, brings powerfully to mind a similar one made by Chinua Achebe about three decades ago. These are weighty statements indeed. And very re-assuring too, especially in this 'post-structural', 'post-modern', 'post-colonial', 'post-Marxist' 'post-humanist' era in which everything, every value, seems to have been 'deconstructed' out of humanising relevance, with old social and epistemological staples such as meaning, knowledge, history, truth, beauty, even morality and justice destabilised by theoretical undecidabilities.

Attention has shifted from literature as a transitive medium of social and cultural exchange to literature as an arrogant, self-sufficient, autolectic 'text', a dehydrated, disembodied thing rendered thoroughly incomprehensible by turgid, impenetrable theorising. All truths become fictions. All knowledge evaporates in an abyss of existential emptiness. Having assassinated the author and dumped him/her in an unmarked, 'undecidable' grave, the theorist, self-crowned, roars into pedantic prominence, advertising a readerly competence which clarifies neither who this reader is or is meant to be, nor the parameters on which his/her 'competence' is based. In this high-voltage, peacock-throne affair, the 'theorist' is king, the new Hollywood-type superstar, strutting self-contentedly from one ivory tower to another gathering at each stop a captive band of apostles whose followership is largely

anchored on their blissful inability to comprehend the master's super texts. The literary idiom has graduated from conceit to conundrum; the critic, far from being the age-old facilitator and mediator whose own responses enrich the original discourse, has 'post-modernised' into an oracle, a supposed interpreter who himself needs a train of other interpreters.

The 'theorist' is the new culture hero of academe; the old, revered vocations of scholar, intellectual, or teacher have been 'deconstructed' into helpless irrelevance, the tenure track and the academic journals which ensure a sure footing on it having been most heroically taken over by trendy pundits. Literary discourse seems to have entered a 'post-critical', 'post-clarity' period. Shall we say welcome to the era of the 'gaudy patter'? The 'literary pessimism' spawned by post-structuralism described by Alvin Kernan as the 'darker forms of structuralism' (p. 165) has shifted focus from literature as a social construct to literature as abstract textuality. In this fashion of thinking, not only the parole, the actual practice of discourse is flawed; the very langue, the foundational matrix of language, is slave to a disabling indeterminacy. When all texts are thus deemed to be inadequate, incomplete, fragmentary, volatile, and eternally contradictory, how can we reach out to that relative predictability, that romantic ideal, that epistemological stability without which

literature (nay all art) can hardly accomplish its human and humanist project?

**In Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma**, the fourth essay in this book, Kenzaburo Oe articulates a robust critique of contemporary Euro-American cultural-literary theories, especially the replacivist fallacy embodied by the prefix 'post-' itself based

on the assumption that 'when some cultural theory had been established, a new one could be made to follow it simply by adding the prefix 'post-' to the existing one' (p. 86). Oe criticises the refusal or inability of contemporary theorising to accept a synchronicity of a variety of ideas and theories, its almost automatic process of 'accepting' and 'discharging' borrowed ideas (p. 99).

Of even graver pertinence is the foreign provenance of these theories and ideas and their 'one-way journey from abroad' (p. 88). Oe is concerned that 'the eyes and ears of the Japanese intelligentsia have been directed towards the West since the Meiji Restoration' (p. 80), an attitude which has worked wonders on the technological plane but which in the cultural realm has fostered a large measure of uneasy dependency. This condition is in turn responsible for the discouragement of the growth and development of an indigenous cultural theory:

'With only a few exceptions, the Japanese were unable to establish a cultural theory of their own, and despite the enthusiasm they engendered, the theories imported from elsewhere essentially had nothing to do with Japan, which can be seen from the fact that they now seem as remote and foreign as they did at the very outset' (p. 96).

Just substitute the words 'Japan' and 'Japa-

nese' here, and you would think that Oe had contemporary Africa in mind. His passion for indigeneity without xenophobia, for authenticity without exclusivism is at one with that of several African writers and thinkers who have called attention to the danger inherent in an uncritical and slavish acceptance of theories which originated in foreign lands without an intelligent effort to test their suitability for their target domain and its own peculiarities. Theories, ideas, even prejudices spawned in the ferment of foreign history and culture are embraced by many African intellectuals and foisted on a compliant African audience. To some this is part of Africa's 'post-colonial' blessing, but to the more discerning this 'cargo-mentality' is nothing short of a re-colonial project. Ama Ata Aidoo made a similar observation before Kole Omotoso gave it the necessary emphasis in a recent article:

'However liberating for western culture post-modernism and post-structuralism and post-colonialism have been, there is no doubt that they have been anything but obfuscation for African culture.' (**European Incorporation of Third World Literature**, Omotoso, 1995, in memo)

In addition to this Omotoso also sees these theoretical trends as a 'simple story of Euro-American diversion of attention from what needs to be the priorities of African literary concern' (p. 3). There is an urgent need therefore to free African thinking from the trammels of its 'Euro-American pace-setter(s)' (p. 4) and liberate African discourse from 'dogmatic and fanatical' Western critical canons. In a nutshell there is a crying necessity to decolonize post-colonialism itself.

The striking similarity (even coincidence) of these African views and those of Kenzaburo Oe, a Japanese, must tell us something about the essential universality of true literature, its rooted, yet mobile capability, its peripatetic possibilities. Oe's canvas is wide, his strokes bold and definitive. In his experiential amplitude, in the unbound geography of his vision, is a sensibility and a sympathy which can be clearly described as 'African', a passionate engagement with society and fearless interrogation of its vital institutions - those concerns which having been 'post-modernised' in 'post-industrial' parts of the world, are now increasingly regarded as the laggard preoccupations of 'Third World' aesthetics.

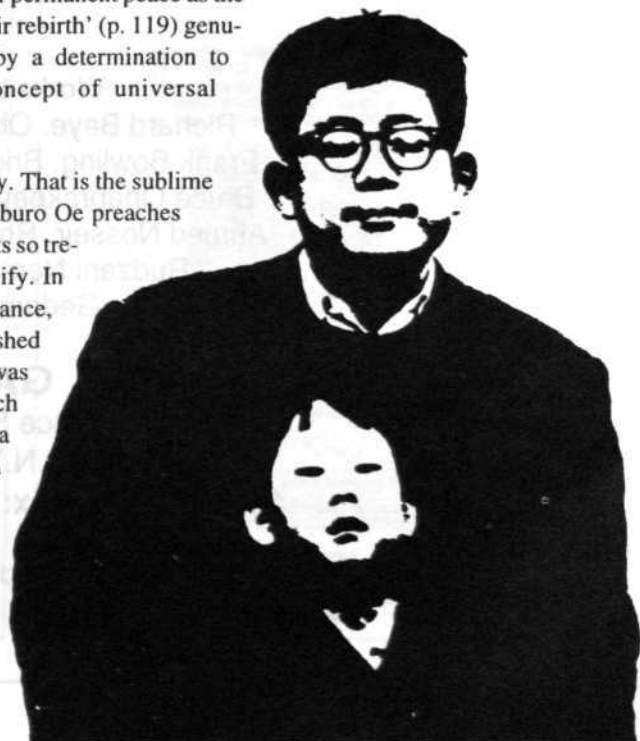
Thus **Japan, the Ambiguous and Myself**,

the title essay which was also his Nobel Prize speech in 1994 is both a re-definition and a re-confirmation of the writer's engagement with a complex country. His compatriot and predecessor on the Nobel platform, Yasunari Kawabata, had titled his own lecture **Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself** twenty six years earlier. Oe's evaluation of Japan, without being less patriotic is more hard-headed and more problematic. It is a sympathetic interrogation of the Japanese soul, a brief but sincere excursion into its history and a critical consideration of the 'ambiguity' of its 'beauty'. The beauty Oe perceives wears no fairy smiles and waves no flag. It is, in fact, no rounded or concluded phenomenon but a national ideal in a dynamic process of becoming. Contemporary Japan for Oe is more 'ambiguous' than 'beautiful', but the supremely humanist novelist foresees a complex beauty emerging from the present uneasy ambiguity.

And with rational patriotism and rare candour, Oe recognises himself as the citizen of a nation stamped into 'insanity in enthusiasm for destruction' both on its own soil and that of neighbouring nations (p. 116), 'a country stained by their own history of territorial invasion' (p. 117). Recounting Japan's 'annexation of Korea and its war of aggression against China' (p. 59) Oe recognises the irony in the status of Japan as a nation that 'has always been an aggressor towards those nations among which it should count itself' (p. 61). 'The burden of that knowledge', Oe confesses 'weighs heavily on me' (ibid.). And in a flash of visionary optimism, he foresees a Japan in search of 'a lifestyle that does not pose a threat to other Asian neighbours' (p. 73), a people who opt for 'the principle of permanent peace as the moral basis for their rebirth' (p. 119) genuinely committed by a determination to 'establish the concept of universal humanity' (p. 120).

Universal humanity. That is the sublime ideal which Kenzaburo Oe preaches and which his works so tremendously exemplify. In **The Catch** for instance, a short story published in 1958 (when he was just 23) and which won the Akutagawa Prize, Oe tells a grippingly imagi-

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KENZABURO  
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native story of a black American pilot caught and imprisoned by some villagers in a Japanese country-side. The captive was treated like a strange animal in a cellar where he remained shackled and dehumanised. But a strong bond soon developed between the imprisoned alien and the village boys, a bond which revealed the inherent humanity in each party and drastically shortened the distance created by racial and age difference. But as this process of discovery and communion was approaching a stage of maturity, the Negro airman was killed and the village boys lost the 'catch' who became a friend. Awestruck and totally dazed, the boys just could not comprehend the mad logic of the behaviour of adults. For them the whole incident was a traumatic process of initiation, a rite of brutal becoming. 'I was no longer a child', confessed the young protagonist who throughout was closest to the captured Negro.

**The Catch** is Oe's commentary on the irrationality and destructiveness of war, in this case the Pacific war (1941-45) which shook Japan and devastated the prosperous culture of Okinawa. In the end it is the entire warring society that becomes captive, the stench of blood and mayhem spreading like a choking miasma, enveloping the whole land and rising to the startled sky.

War destroys, sometimes utterly. But one of the salient functions of art is to heal, to show the war-ravaged psyche of a country the path to self-recovery and fortify its people with adequate moral deterrence. What keeps striking us like a powerful refrain in **Japan the Ambiguous, and Myself** is Oe's abiding faith in the power of art to cure and restore. His family life provides a personal testimony to these ideals. His first born, Hikari, was born mentally handicapped. As a child he only responded to the chirping of birds, not to human voices. He was 'mute' until the age of six when a pair of water rails provoked his first articulate sentence. From then on opened his channel of communication with other humans, this miracle child who grew up to be a music composer. In Oe's words, Hikari 'was awakened by the voices of birds to the music of Bach and Mozart' (p. 127).

**Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself** presents Kenzaburo Oe as a native of Japan and citizen of the world. Rooted, yet cosmopolitan, he ranged with relevant ease through the literatures of Asia and Europe. Of particular significance here is his apprehension of the history of Japanese literature and his compassionate recognition of younger talents. To adapt a Yoruba idiom, this is a rooster so mindful of the struggle of fledgling chicks. Oe takes us forcibly back to the

ideals of justice, freedom, beauty, truth, morality, compassion; advocates a rejection of that militarism which goads stronger nations into the subjugation of weaker ones, or richer individuals into the oppression of poorer ones. He is champion of those values and virtues which have gone out of fashion in this 'post-humanist' era and its philosophy of nihilistic anxiety. Like Daisaku Ikeda, his prominent compatriot, Oe holds the belief that:

'The society that understands nothing but snatching from others is no better than a world of thieves and looters... Its inhabitants, though they wear clothes of the latest fashion, deserve to be called a herd of wild beasts.' (p. 33)

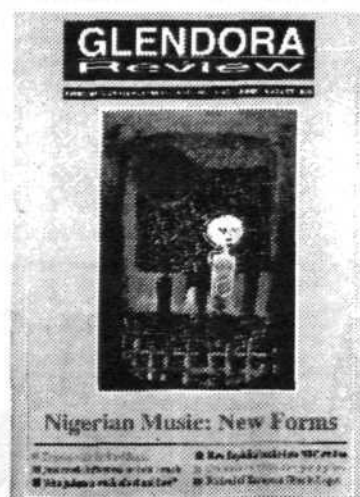
A man with a mission and a vision in an age of deconstructed consciousnesses and resurgent anarchism, Kenzaburo Oe is a writer so clearly, so usefully aware of his place in the world, and equally clear about where he thinks this world should be heading. **Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself** is written to heal our angst and restore decent humanism to our encounter with one another and the world. In the author's own words, it is designed 'to be of some use in the cure and reconciliation of mankind' (p. 128). The book is both a challenge and a covenant. **GR**

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