

# **KENZABURO OE'S *A PERSONAL MATTER*: A NON-WESTERN PERSPECTIVE**

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## **BACKGROUND**

Among the recent developments in critical theories, cultural studies is the one that demands for multiple perspectives to approach a text. Though literary texts generally depict common human passions on the background of a particular culture, cultural studies assumes that "knowledge and voice are always located in time space and social power (Barker, 1990: 388). Moreover, cultural or literary texts which rarely get space in the academia or are even refuted to enter the academic arena bear the realities about the people belonging to that particular culture more truthfully than canonized ones written by aliens do. However, the general trend is that the truth about minority culture is established only on the basis of the canonized texts and criticisms are based on the perspective of the people belonging to the dominant culture.

In this context, despite being a philosophical or theoretical cannon, Non-Western is one of the perspectives of comparative literature in which the social, political, economic or cultural issues are evaluated from various positionalities. With this perspective, the literature produced by the writers representing the Non-Western societies or countries are incorporated in Non-Western literature with as much respect as those representing the so-called superior cultures produced by the writers belonging the respective cultures. Further, in Non-Western Literature, as a separate paper in the academic discipline, literary discourses representing the culture that lies beyond the European-American context are evaluated so as to explore the realities about them without depending on the mediated discourses produced by the aliens.

Like literature in general, Non-Western literature also addresses the common human passions such as love and sexuality along with other social issues like race, class, gender and identity. It also raises the problems like unemployment, poverty, old age, disability, youth, childhood, ethnicity, etc. However, the focus is laid on the responses of the people in the Non-Western background in order to provide them space for voicing their concerns. For this purpose, the writers are found to be presenting either only Western or both Western as well as Non-Western characters in their writings. With this view, the Non-Western writers try to represent the cultural clash prevalent in the third world, for inviting debate in the intellectual arena.

*A Personal Matter* by Kenzaburo Oe is also one of the Non-Western productions representing the Japanese society in the post war context. The text makes an adequate amalgamation of multiple positionalities represented by the characters from the Western (Euro-American), hybrid and the conventional local culture. The text available for us is a translation by a person who does not belong

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to the target culture; therefore there is enough room for debate about its authenticity. The representations or rewritings, are of immense importance for cultural studies because translations often operate under varied constraints and that these constraints include manipulations of power relations that aim at constructing an "image" of the source culture that preserves or extends the hegemony of the dominant group (Lefevere, 1990: 15-27).

However, I would not like to dwell upon this issue because translation is also taken as a source for deriving information about the target culture despite the possibility of manipulation. The focus of this paper will be on the responses of characters belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds to the common human issues such as disability, sex, war, love and family obligation in a Non-Western cultural context.

### **AN EVALUATIVE SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL**

*A Personal Matter* begins with the introduction of a twenty seven year old teacher nicknamed Bird. He is employed in a cram school and is frustrated with the monotonous life in the post war Japanese society. In order to escape the drudgery of life. Bird would like to make a trip to Africa which, for him, is "in a process of dizzying change" (2). He dreams of having reached to Africa but the dream is broken by the phone call of his mother-in-law from the hospital. She informs that his wife has delivered an abnormal baby. The news shocks Bird so much that he fears the baby might shatter his dream of visiting Africa. He therefore "shuts his eyes tight and tries to submerge in the warmth of his bed, as if by denying reality he could instantly banish it. But nothing changed" (14). On the way to the hospital, he goes on visualizing the death of the baby. At the hospital, he is astonished to hear the comment of the doctor that the baby is "a species of monster beyond classification" (18).

With further inquiry, he discovers that the baby had a brain hernia. For operation, the baby is then sent to the University hospital. Bird anticipates death to the baby so that he will soon "forget all about the baby, a life that appeared out of infinite darkness, hovered for nine months in a fetal state, tasted a few hours of cruel discomfort, and descended once again into darkness, final and infinite..." (28). While seeking an escape route from loneliness and frustration, Bird remembers his former girlfriend Himiko and dashes towards her home.

Himiko was leading a lonely life after her husband had committed suicide. She was living a despicable life as a sexual adventures having "broken out of conventional orbit" in spite of her sufficient property left by the husband. Bird spends the night there by submerging into drinking with Himko. Bird gradually develops a suicidal spirit when he envisions the kind of abominable life he was going to live with the monster baby. The narrator comments. "Had it been possible, Bird would have elected to hurl himself into the toilet as he pulled the chain and thus be flushed with a roar of water down into a sewery hell" (57).

The next day, Bird goes to teach at the cram school where he vomits in the classroom due to the hangover. Consequently, he has to resign from the job.

Now, having been released from the obligations at the school, he would like to travel to "Africa, another universe" according to Himiko. The only burden upon him is the monster baby; therefore he anticipates its death as soon as possible. On visiting the hospital the next morning, the improvement in the baby's health makes Bird feel much more shame and rage that results into a desire to have an antisocial sex. With the newly generated passion for breaking all the conventional norms, Bird again goes to Himiko and indulges into coition. He says, "I've leaped to highest wall first, I should be able to clear all the hurdles of shame now, like a track man in infinite time." (85). In spite of a sense of disgust and self-pity, the act of coition frees him from suicidal spirit to some extent and he eventually says, "But I won't commit suicide" (88).

Back in the university hospital, Bird dissembles his desire to let the baby weaken and die so that he could "escape the burden of a vegetable baby" (91) without fouling his own hands with its murder. However, he does not get support from the hospital authority. After spending one more night with Himiko, Bird goes to meet his wife who suspects about his attitude to the baby. She even threatens Bird of parting with him in case anything happened to the baby due to his carelessness.

In the evening at Himiko's home, the assistant director informs Bird about the schedule of baby's operation. On the other hand, as proposed by Himiko's father-in-law, Bird and Himiko plan to go to Africa together so that she could forget the agony of the death of her husband and Bird could escape the burden of the monster baby. For acting out the plan, they find it necessary to avoid the baby from their path. Bird says, "I must forbid them to operate, otherwise the baby will march into my world like an occupying army" (137). Finally, they decide to avoid the operation by taking the baby away from the hospital and hand it over to the abortionist, one of Himiko's old acquaintances, for murdering.

To the hospital staff's astonishment, Himiko and Bird get the baby discharged and set out for the abortionist's clinic. On the way, Bird is holding the baby in his lap. Suddenly, it begins to weep as if it has seen through their cruel plot. This time, Bird realizes his attachment with the baby and feels "as if he were about to be led to his own death at the hands of a shady abortionist. Not the baby" (143). However, being trapped in indecision, he leaves the child at the abortionist's clinic for its murder. Bird and Himiko, then, go to spend the night at the gay bar of Kikuhiko. Bird is more occupied with the love for the baby. Therefore, he realizes that his "personal matter is governed not by Himiko but by the monster baby" (150). Bird, now restless with a sense of guilt, says to Himiko, "I've decided to take the baby back to university hospital and let them operate. I've stopped rushing at every exit door" (16). Thus he avers his determination to stop being a man who is always running away. Himiko, astonished with this decision, tries to dissuade him from having the baby operated. However, Bird does not change his mind rather bids farewell to Himiko and leaves the bar in a cab for the clinic to save the baby which to him meant to save himself.

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On the way back to the clinic, Bird is worried that he might die before accomplishing his responsibility as a father. He says, "If I die in accident now before I save the baby, my whole twenty seven years of life will have meant exactly nothing" (163). Bird, thus stricken with a sense of fear more profound than any he had ever known gets in time to the clinic and saves the baby.

The novel ends with the rejoinder of Bird's family in autumn when the baby is brought out from the Intensive Care Unit after a successful operation. Bird's father-in-law congratulates him for the courage he showed in the treatment of the baby that actually didn't have brain hernia but a simple tumor. Now Bird, a mature father and a responsible citizen of his nation relinquishes his passion for Africa but wants to work in his own country by being a native guide, for the foreigners.

### **SEXUALITY**

Sexuality is one of the chief issues addressed in the novel. It is treated more abundantly and openly than normally found in other Non-Western products. Sex scenes portrayed in the text are rather unconventional. The extramarital courtship of Bird and virgin Himiko in their college days was far beyond cultural acceptance. For this reason, they had to keep it outside the knowledge of the society. The relationship breaks after their marriages with other candidates. However, both the conventional marriages reap little success. After the husband commits suicide, Himiko becomes a sex adventuress. She returns to Bird's life only after birth of his abnormal baby. Himiko represents the perverse culture, whereas Bird can't escape the tradition. It is only after coming in Himiko's company that Bird makes an unsuccessful endeavor to break the conventional boundary. Due to the fear of potential abnormal births, Bird is reluctant to indulge into normal intercourse. But after some significant changes in his life, he returns to normal sex. Now, he can't even imagine of the homosexual relation with the gays like Kikuhiko. The second meeting with Kikuhiko makes him hate this perverse culture to the extent that intensifies his tie with his own wife. Such hatred towards abnormal sex is one of the salient features of the Non-Western culture. Bird is rather neither satisfied with the conventional sexual relationship, nor can permanently discard it. Therefore the text presents a subtle picture of cultural clash in which Bird is trapped.

### **BIRD AS AN EXISTENTIAL HERO**

Bird is the construct of his own choice. He does not believe in the existence of God to justify his conduct. Existentialists believe that "as there is no God, there is no fundamental irrational and absurd. And because there is no God, we experience ourselves as abandoned and are forlorn. How are we to exist in an absurd world? This is the fundamental human problem for the existentialists" (Moore & Bruder, 1996: 257). In the novel Bird is introduced only with nickname, not even surname. Nowhere in the novel can we trace the reference of his ancestry. He is staying in a rented house because he does not have one of his own. He seems as if he has been "thrown" into this world to suffer. H chooses to create a new root through marriage with the daughter of a professor who bears

the stamp of respectability. However he can't estimate the gravity of his responsibility as a father since he does not possess the legacy of parenthood. He therefore would like to go to Africa and live beyond the drudgery of the so-called civilized living.

The burden added with the birth of the abnormal child deepens the frustration in Bird; therefore he tries to run away from it. He chooses to drink and deny the reality. He loses the job just because he does not see any good in bowing down for its continuation. He would rather get freedom for it so that he could materialize his dream by landing in Africa a land beyond the burden of civilization. Still due to his inability to detach himself from the wife and the child, he becomes paranoiac. Now, he chooses to stay with Himiko but the attachment with his blood can't be replaced by the prospects of change obtained in Africa. Momentarily, he accepts the proposal of Himiko's father-in-law to begin a new life with Himiko, but finally he abandons the hope, for the sake of his blood in whom he finds his own resemblance. The farther he goes from his family, the closer he finds himself to it. As a result, he chooses to return to the family, the society and finally to the nation. He says,

I've decided to forget about a career in college teaching— I'm thinking of becoming a guide for foreign tourists. A dream of mine has always been to go to Africa and be a native guide, so I'll just be reversing the fantasy: I'll be the native guide, for the foreigners who come to Japan (165).

#### **ATTITUDE TOWARD DISABLES**

As the disfigured child is born of Bird's wife, the whole society expresses repugnance towards it. The doctors ridicule the baby's monstrosity. They giggle at its state beyond classification. They even try to avoid their responsibility and send it to the government hospital full of bureaucratic attitude, a characteristic of most institutions in the Non-Western countries. Even the doctors pay less heed to the child who is in rigor of action. Consequently, Bird suffers from this corrupt and bureaucratic tradition. But the disabled survives the difficulties and grows amidst the unwelcome attitude of almost all concerned. Finally, with the changed father, the baby escapes from the verge of death. Disability therefore becomes more a matter of people's mental construct than a physical reality. The father is changed therefore the baby escapes insalubrious treatment from all.

#### **ATTITUDE TO WAR**

The novel presents an explicitly anti-war attitude. The birth of the monstrous baby is the result of the atomic war that has left Japan with the effect of the radioactive rays affecting the health of the people resulting to frequent abnormal as well as stillbirths. Towards the end of the novel Bird loathes the war which for him, is the result of our "common action like the lemmings' mass suicide." He is indifferent towards world news but rather engrossed in the personal matter. He believes that everyone is to live by himself. He is to make a choice and determine the universe before stumbling upon death. Bird argues that the West would use war for the purpose of maintaining power but he prefers non-

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violence. The spirit of violence that was developed by Himiko ends by the time Bird frees himself from her. Himiko learns the true, genuine authentic life in Bird. The novelist seems to mean that the West has to learn this meaning of life from the east.

Bird possesses little heroism at the beginning. He is rootless; he is living on the job provided by his father-in-law and is afraid of him. He lacks determination. He tries to run away from responsibilities. In front of his wife, he conceals everything and remains a passive listener. He can't face the world outside. At first he was afraid to sleep alone at Himiko's place, but later decides to keep his child irrespective of any challenge he could have to face. At the end, his father-in-law appreciates him for his courage. Bird, a representative of the Non-West, gradually attains courage to open up and exhibit their potentialities to the West. It is a growth from humiliation and self-deception found in an ambivalent individual trapped in between two cultures to into a confident, responsible man with full self-development.

### **FOCUS ON PERSONAL MATTER AND CONCLUSION**

In *A Personal Matter*, the protagonist undergoes a growth from the lack of strength/courage, the common human problem. A child is born abnormal, the wife is in a hospital bed. He can neither disclose it to the society (the landlady would ridicule it, can't tell it to Himiko). Nor can he run away from the problem. He is lost in the mental conflict of what choice he is to make. Should he desert the idea of going to Africa by dedicating for the care of the wife and the child? He has the limited resource which does not allow him to enjoy both (a N/W feature).

At the beginning, he takes to drinking. He drinks so much that he obtains a temporary relief from the torture. He develops a suicidal spirit (quote). But he stays with Himiko in whose home the husband had also committed suicide. He compares himself with him and now decides not to be as coward as Himiko's husband. Gradually, Bird succeeds to forbear the problem. He, who had previously decided to kill the baby, begins to develop love towards it.

Finally, Bird rejects the new culture obtained from Himiko and Kikuhiko and returns to his family pleasure. He finds that death of the baby would be the death of his own. Therefore Bird returns to the clinic and takes the baby back to university hospital. The baby born in June (heat and rain) is operated and a new life of fruitfulness is begun in autumn when the whole family rejoins. He is no longer willing to go to Africa, so wild place but settle in Japan (nationality), to be the guide to teach the culture to the foreigners. He is fit to be so because he can be the Link between the two cultures. Then the west the needs to know the positive things social ethos of the east and the east and to take what is good in the West becomes possible. He is ready to dedicate his life to this duty for the nation. This determination or choice is the choice of a grown mature man who not only goes for pleasure or adventure, neither follows the tradition and sticks to it blindly.

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