

Chapter 3. Thousand cranes. Representations of nuclear impact on the life and death of Japanese people

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Abstract

It is clearly assessed that stressful life events have influence on human illness. It is essential to know the impact these events had on the representation of health/illness and life/death dichotomies in the collective memory and their importance in the setting in motion strategies of health promotion. The study of these representations might help us to understand the impact on the idea of health/illness.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the representations of the process of falling ill or dying caused by two stressful life events occurred in Japan: The atomic bombings in Hiroshima/Nagasaki and the nuclear accident occurred in Fukushima. With a lapse of 60 years between them, both episodes are characterized by the nuclear impact on human health and social life. We propose a comparison of the representations of the concept of falling ill/dying through literary texts written by both Japanese and foreign authors.

We will assess the cultural differences that exist in the fear of suffering: In the representations from Japanese people we find open-minded expressions of suffering as a path to acquire social knowledge, while in those from other countries, much of the focus is given to the heroism of others' suffering.

Keywords: stressful-life-events, representations, human health, literature.

Theoretical background

1-1-. Stressful life events

A stressful life event is any unexpected event that produces a strong impact. In clinical psychiatry its effects are related to symptoms of depression,

anxiety or distress. A stressful life event could be an individual experience or a collective one. In the latter, the effects are still evident in the collective memory and have an influence on social, cultural and symbolic processes. However, we must also take into consideration the strong influence that stressful life events have on global human illness, bearing in mind the biological, psychological and social aspects (Gómez, 2004).

Thus, it is essential to know the impact that these stressful life events had on the representation of health/illness and life/death dichotomies in the collective memory, and their importance in the setting in motion of strategies of health promotion. The study of these representations, evident in many expressions, might help us to understand the psychological and social impact on the idea of health/illness.

1-2-. Literatureas a way of expression

We must consider the importance of literature as a way of expression of human feelings. In this sense, much of the events that have had impact on human life generates the need to write about it in one way or another. For centuries, literature and health-related sciences have run in parallel somehow. Health workers want to express their experiences, and even patients choose to write about them. But another person's illnesses or fictions experiences have also appeared in literary texts (Montiel, 1999). The issues related to human suffering offer dramatic quality and give versatility to stories.

When we pay attention to stressful life events, it is necessary to analyse the works written by the collective who suffered the event (including health workers), apart from the texts of other authors who use the event as a literary resource to construct their stories.

1-3-. Atomic impacts in Japan

We are going to focus on two stressful life events occurred in Japan: the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945), and the nuclear accident occurred in Fukushima (2011). With a lapse of 60 years between them, both episodes are characterized by the nuclear impact on the human health and the social life.

The history of Sadako Sasaki has become a symbol of the impact of nuclear war. Sadako died at the age of 12 due to the effects of the radioactive dust, ten years after the atomic weapons exploded in Hiroshima. A statue of Sadako was built in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, and also in other locations as the Peace Park in Seattle (USA).

Sadako devoted her time to fold origami cranes because there is an ancient Japanese legend that promises that anyone who folds a thousand origami cranes will be granted a wish, such as long life or recovery from illness. We take the title of our paper from this legend, which has become popular by Sadako not only in Japan, but also all over the world.

This is an example of how a stressful life event causes a representative and symbolic production in a society.

Method / Description of the experience

The aim of this paper is to analyse the representations of the process of falling ill or dying caused by the atomic impacts occurred in Japan. We are going to study the representations made specifically through literary texts, proposing a comparison through literary texts written by both Japanese and foreign people.

We will focus on questions such as:

- The number of literary works and accessibility to them.
- The connection between the author and the event.
- The kind of literary account.
- The style and content.

We have only selected printed books due to the large number of digital texts which are quite difficult to analyse right now.

We also carried out some interviews to Japanese persons about these matters.

Results

3.1. Japanese texts

3.1.1. *Impact on society: atomic bomb literature (原爆文学 - genbaku bungaku).*

When we analyze Japanese texts, one of the most important questions to bear in mind is the existence of a literary subgenre called “atomic bomb literature” (原爆文学 - genbaku bungaku). This shows the great importance that the atomic impact had on Japanese people.

Many authors of this subgenre were hibakusha (被爆者). Hibakusha is the Japanese word for the surviving victims of the atomic bombings. The word literally translates as "explosion-affected people". Most of the hibakusha were exposed to radiation from the bombings. It is highly significant to see that there was a need to create a specific word to refer to this group.

Other authors were medical practitioners or soldiers who were in care of the victims. Sometimes, they were hibakusha, too. An example is the doctor Michihiko Hachiya, who wrote Hiroshima diary (1955). Although they did not live the experience themselves, some professionals of letters had direct knowledge about the events. An example is the Nobel Prize novelist, Kenzaburo Oe (1965), who visited Hiroshima for years to write his report Hiroshima notes. The prologue starts with these words: "Perhaps it is improper to begin a book like this with a reference to one's personal experience" (p. 13).

There is not a single literary category which could unify the "atomic bomb literature". We can find diaries, reports, poetry (for example haiku), theatre, tales, novels, manga works and fiction stories that focus their subjects on the moment of the nuclear disaster and on its effects and subsequent consequences. Generally, it is easier to find printed books about the nuclear impacts on Hiroshima than those about Nagasaki or Fukushima.

Naturally, most of the works were written days after the event. Hachiya (1955) says: "*I wrote whenever I could find time after August 8th, 1945*" (p. 231). The movement was censored between 1945 and 1950, especially by the North American authorities of the occupation. However, from nineteen sixty the movement was reappraised owing to the publication of some works of national prestigious authors as Oe and Masuji.

The Fukushima nuclear disaster in March of 2011 revived the movement of *genbaku bungaku*. However, since there are some differences in this movement when compared with that of atomic bombs we cannot still talk about a particular movement (only six years after the event):

-The number of people affected was lower. All Japan was feeling affected by the nuclear impacts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki because it was a military confrontation.

-The cause was a natural disaster. When we ask Japanese people about this question, they consider that the bombs generated more impact than the accident of Fukushima: "In my opinion, the use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a 'slaughter', whatever their justification might be. Far from it, Fukushima was a sad accident. It gives us a lesson about the use of nuclear power stations, but the accident wasn't caused deliberately" (Japanese person born in Hiroshima¹).

-Most of the works related to Fukushima are published in social networks or in websites, accompanied by visual resources as photographs and videos.

3.1.2. Representations of life, death and illness.

How are life, death, and illness represented in Japanese texts? We shall summarize the essential features below.

-Expression of feelings. Some authors consider that *genbaku bungaku* is a written thoughtful response to the need to express themselves after this stressful life event. However, we have to take into consideration that the Japanese society is not used to do it publicly (Benedict, 1946).

The feelings expressed tend to be harsh as one can easily imagine. The authors talk about the impact of the destruction produced by the radiation from the bombings in material goods and people.

Nonetheless, they do not take advantage of rhetoric: The expressions tend to be plain, open and explicit. Only some metaphorical comparisons reinforce

¹ We don't mention the names because of privacy matters.

the descriptions. Comparing with other sentimentalists' works, these expressions could be seen as plain and objective, but they are full of emotion.

-Treatment of the affected people. Victims are never praised as heroes. They are treated as normal people who suffer the consequences of the event. The suffering is presented from an image of not-ghoulish harshness. Authors try to narrate what they see, what they think about the things they see and how they feel when they see them: "My second brother pulled off Fumihiko's fingernails [his son], took his belt too as a memento, attached a name tag and left. It was an encounter beyond tears." (Hara, 2011, p. 89).

-Representation of illness. Ignorance, depression and lack of understanding are the main feelings that the authors transmit to us. During this process, the fear from the unknown and the uncertainty regarding this new disease appears. Nor the victims neither the medical practitioners know anything about symptoms and prognosis. The disease is shown as a process of unnecessary suffering that in most cases leads to death. After the fifties, with the pathological processes already known, the representation of the disease in the literature comes together with the fear of deformity and of the social stigma.

The expressions of anguish due to personal and non-physical issues do not fall apart. The main subjects are the family or the fear to have physical handicap that could prevent him/her from working in case of staying alive. Other subjects that often appear are the anxiety about Japan's surrender and the American occupation, which increases the panic in the victims.

-Representation of life and death: in the case of the hibakusha, the most important aspect is the gratitude for life. It used to be expressed through Buddhist concepts. Hachiya (1955) writes:

"I have lost my home and my wealth, and I was wounded, but disregarding this, I consider it fortunate my wife and I are alive. I am grateful for this even though there was someone to die in every home in my neighbourhood." (p. 229)

As for the death, the reflections appear constantly, especially when they are referred to the uncertainty of the future, its imminent arrival and the need (or not) of suffering before dying.

The general consideration about the effects of radiation is that this is an avoidable harm. Thus, it not only opens a path to political and social discussion, but also enhances the activation of health promotion activities and the avoidance of behavioural risks. Every book we have read makes an appeal for the need to learn from the experience.

3.2. Non-Japanese Texts

Genbaku-bungaku was a quite unknown subgenre in the West, so there is no response by other countries' authors. Furthermore, these authors do not have direct experience with the events. In contrast, in Europe we can find a great number of books concerning the Holocaust or, in the Spanish case, about the Spanish Civil War.

The "atomic bomb literature" arrives to *the Western culture* quite late. To be precise, in Spain we had only indirect translations from English until a few years ago. Nevertheless, we can find great number of works about the Fukushima disaster in only five years.

On the whole, in the non-Japanese works the atomic events are used as a context for melodramatic stories, although novels used to have a happy ending. Suffering and death caused by the nuclear impacts give sentimentalism to the plots, but they are not usually the central theme.

Furthermore, in many cases, the authors have no experience with Japanese culture, and sometimes the characters of the stories express feelings in a way which is unnatural in Japanese society. In these stories, the victims are praised as heroes who are fighting for survival.

Discussion

"Tomorrow is August, the 6th, and here in Hiroshima we have a ceremony in the Peace Park at quarter past eight, the time when the bomb exploded. There are lots of television programmes these days. But please, don't believe that whole Japan is interested in this event, but rather there is too little interest outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." (An interviewee born in Hiroshima; August, 5th, 2016).

In conclusion, we have tried to assess the cultural differences that exist in the fear from suffering: In the representations from Japanese people we find open-minded expressions of despair and suffering as a path to social knowledge, while the representations in other countries focus on the heroism of others' suffering.

We must consider that the narrative aims are different: Whereas Japanese authors try to express the experience looking for a learning process, "foreign" works are fictional stories in which stressful life events provide not only a contextual plot but also dramatic episodes.

We should highlight that in Japanese works the expression of suffering is a way to learn about the needs of care of the people, not only their biological needs, but also social, psychological, cultural or political needs.

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