

Writing Against Violence: Oe Kenzaburo and Edward Said

Christopher Isherwood

Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between Oe Kenzaburo and Edward Said from the theme of 'Writing Against Violence'. The central hypothesis argues that while Oe is stridently against violence in his essays and letters, his short stories and novels give an entirely different picture. Oe is clearly against the use of physical violence or force. He has been an anti-war advocate for most of his life. Yet his writing style clearly employs a form of violence that can be referred to as 'structural' in that it attacks standardized Japanese language, manufactured images of what it means to be 'Japanese', and cultural imperialism. Through his correspondence with Said the reader can discern the central themes and leitmotifs in Oe's stories that reflect structural violence. While empire, colonization, racism, and exploitation are the targets, Oe applies Said's concepts of 'borders', and 'hybridity', 'centre and periphery' to displace monolithic and essentialist descriptions of national identity and culture. It becomes clear that Oe sees the aporia of Japan's modernizing process as a form of 'internal colonization'. The question is, should violence play a role in Japan's 'de-colonizing' process, and if so, to what degree?

In re-reading (your book) *Culture and Imperialism* in my native language, I become keenly aware that, written some 10 years ago, it can be an exact analysis of present-day Japan and Japanese. The Japanese are now willingly accepting the rule by cultural imperialism or unification of the cultural and national identity, which engulfed America at the time of the Gulf War... (Oe Kenzaburo to Edward Said)

Dear Oe-san: I must say first of all how honored I am by this exchange of letters with you. As one of the world's greatest writers, you are also a sensitive witness to the travails of our time, particularly those that concern Japan, an extraordinary country that seems to embody more intractably than most, the contradictions, the ups and downs of modernity and tradition, war and peace, dependence and audacity, empire and its loss. (Edward Said to Oe Kenzaburo)

In 2003, just two years after the Twin Towers in New York were attacked on September 11th Japanese Nobel Laureate Oe Kenzaburo published a compilation of letters under the title *Writing against Violence (Boryoku ni Sakaratte Kaku)*, including one letter (quoted above) to the late literary and social critic Edward Said. In the letter Oe points out "cultural imperialism" as the main target of his "writing against violence" and suggests that Japan, once freed from the fascist and ultra nationalist era of WW11, has slipped back into the old ways, signified by the country's willing support of US military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, by sending Self Defense Forces overseas into war zones, and by rattling the saber

of “patriotism” in schools, whether it be by forcing teachers to respect the national anthem and flag, or through publishing history textbooks that gloss over more morbid parts of national memory. Of course, more recently the Liberal Democrat Party has once again began to role back the Japanese Constitution at the behest of the United States, arguing for a ‘new interpretation’ that would allow the government to participate in overseas military campaigns. Indeed, the interpretation of national history as an ideological pursuit that suppresses local memory is a central theme of Oe’s writing. This regression back into ultra conservatism, Oe explains, exposes the symptoms of Japan’s modernization and subsequent traumatic defeat in 1945, culminating in the neo-colonial control of Okinawa as a result of the United States-Japan Security Treaty (or Ampo). While the target of his polemic is seemingly clear, Oe’s understanding of violence and the degree to which violence should be taken, if at all, in resisting forms of cultural imperialism is another story.

Simply said, and to quote the title of Watanabe Kazuo’s book (a line Oe has repeatedly quoted himself) “In order to protect tolerance should we tolerate intolerance?”¹ Should we accept violence as a legitimate form of dissent, and if so, what kind and degree of violence? Put another way, in order to protect democracy, should we accept an exception to the rule that halts the democratic process? As Slavoj Zizek has tirelessly pointed out, the real question, of course, is what should we understand by the term ‘tolerance’ in the first place. Should tolerance be the aim, and if so, how should we understand it in relation to violence? In an age when humanitarian intervention, aid, and the spread of democracy are slogans used by governments to sanction wars, notions of tolerance need to be critically rethought. In retrospect, no one in their right mind could honestly say that we should have shown ‘tolerance’ to Adolf Hitler and the Nazis because they had a different set of ideals. The 20th century saw some of the bloodiest wars of independence in the third world. The question is, how should we understand the violence of liberation movements in the context of Empire.

Oe’s answer to these complex questions is an ambivalent one. In many letters and essays he vociferously promotes pacifism (particularly represented in his praise of Martin Luther King and Gandhi and his ongoing support for article 9 of the Japanese peace constitution), and yet his novels and short stories are riddled with graphic scenes depicting violence. While he may promote (non-physical) violence in his essays, the writing styles and strategies he employs in his novels and short stories can, themselves, be considered violent in that they confront the reader by literally tearing language apart, creating an uncomfortable tension in the syntax and semantics of “standardized” Japanese. No doubt this is why many Japanese today complain about Oe’s novels as being ‘too difficult’. The criticism refers more to his writing style than to the specific contents of his stories. Given these paradoxes and seemingly contradictory approaches to violence it is no surprise that Oe heralds Said’s emphasis on concepts and words that deal with exposing and breaking down ideologies; these words, such as “border”, “exile”, “centre (and periphery)” “culture and imperialism” are words that find cadence with Oe’s own criticism and express structures of violence common to all of his novels, short stories and essays. In this paper I want to look closer at how Oe recognizes Said’s concept of cultural imperialism in order to better understanding the function of violence in his novels and short stories.

On closer inspection of Oe’s stories it becomes clear that the title of his book *Writing*

¹ Oe studied French literature Watanabe Kazuo at the University of Tokyo.

Against Violence should, in fact, be reworded as *Writing Violence Against Violence* in that his writing style deploys strategies that upset language structures and therefore can be understood as a kind of ‘structurally’ violent method of exposing monolithic and essentialist representations of cultural identity. Perhaps one of Oe’s main concerns in his writing has to do with revealing how various forms of authority manipulate society in order to maintain control. From the manipulation of habits and customs, to the control of physical and psychological representations, the result is more often than not domestication or alienation. Thus the concept of “border” in Oe’s works does not simply refer to “geographical” boundaries, but includes the borders of concepts themselves. He writes (in reply to Said’s letter) about the alarming “lack of understanding” Japanese have of a concrete understanding of “humanity” from around the world. Oe goes on the quote Said’s emphasis on the need to reassess how we understand “humanity”, in order to combat the “one-dimensionality” fueling cultural imperialism, clearly visible in the polarization of Islam in the media. This ideological imperative of “humanity” sets up a false antagonism between a more “civilized” western humanity and a “barbaric” non-western in-humanity, similar to that espoused by Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations*. Said has reproached Huntington for his portrayal of ‘civilizations’ as ossified monoliths, and instead emphasizes the inherent ‘hybrid’ characteristics of identity that comes with mass migration and intercultural exchange. Oe points out that this false antagonism was internalized by Meiji Japan in an attempt to colonize itself before being colonized by the western powers. The Meiji government set about creating Japan’s own ‘natives’; Ainu, Okinawans, Burakumin and Zainichi Koreans, to name a few, were manufactured as ‘minorities’ allowing Japanese to assert the purity of their ‘race’. Later the Meiji government used this social Darwinian understanding of racial hierarchies as the justification for territorial expansion and its own war of attrition in the Pacific. Oe’s interest in “humanity”, or more commonly “humanism” is one example of how he distorts the constantly shifting borders between human and non-human (such as the *eta hinin* caste in Japan) and produces something close to what Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming-man”.

What Oe refers to as “*zure o fukumikonda kurikaeshi*” or “repetition with slippage” denotes the endless displacement of “becoming”. Anyone who has read more than one of Oe’s novels or short stories will have noticed the presence of similar (and at times exactly the same) characters and events that reoccur in slightly different situations and conditions. The effect is like reading the same story over again, but from a different vector, not unlike changing the lens of your camera to take the same photo. Science fiction writers call this technique ‘retroactive continuity’ whereby they alter previously established facts in the continuity of a fictional work that demands clarification or a degree of revisionism. One could go as far as to say that Oe has only ever written one story—like a giant tree with branches but no trunk, an organic machine that continues to produce “organs without bodies”. The feeling is unsettling because the “particular” book is actually “universal” in that it represents an event, a singularity, but cannot be consumed or interpreted without violently closing the door. It resists domestication, forcing the reader outside the text, out into a nether land beyond the physical boundaries of the book to clarify meaning.

It is exactly the same feeling one has when confronted with “humans” in his novels; they have animal qualities, they move like animals, smell like animals, look like animals, and even have animal names—there is no before and after, there is simply “between” animal/human. Deleuze and Guattari explain it by suggesting that “(a) line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points, it comes up through the middle...A becoming is neither one nor two, nor

the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both.”² Oe’s novellas such as *Human Sheep*, *The Catch*, *Bird*, and many others all locate human/animal-becomings on borders. Moreover, “becoming animal” is itself not quite animal. In *The Catch* dogs are not simply dogs, they are becoming-dogs/wolves. When two young friends are out catching wild dogs one turns to the other and remarks: “I went after that” (pointing to the dog) “He sure is white,” I said, keeping envy out of my voice. “His mother *mated* with a wolf!” The dialect Harelip used was lewd but very real. ” Not only can we see the becoming-wolf/dog, but as the name “Harelip” suggests, we can also see the border human/animal. These borders, whether between human/animals, standardized language/dialect, centre/periphery, abound Oe’s texts. But why?

As mentioned above, Oe’s modus operandi is to de-territorialize and re-territorialize concepts such as “civilized” and “barbaric”, ideological concepts, as Said argues, which have been used to manipulate and domesticate (like a pet dog), to replace “violence” with “tolerance”, and to centralize and monopolize. In effect, Oe portrays what Norbert Elias has called “the civilizing process” as a form of domesticating violence, and reflects the dangers this has on real political struggle and emancipation. It is in the “repetition with slippage” in-between concepts such as “civilized/barbaric” where Oe finds a commonality with Said.

Ironically, however, Oe’s singling out of “the Japanese lack” (mentioned above) seems to contradict his very argument, in that it situates his (our?) understanding of humanism specifically within ethnic or national borders. Indeed, this has been the basis of an ongoing polemic against Oe, in particular his inability to move beyond essentialist depictions of “the Japanese”, whether it be through his use of folklorists such as Yanagita Kunio and Origuchi Shinobu, or his valorization of the periphery a la Yamaguchi Masao (in this case, the quintessential Japanese village) as the “real” Japan. David Pollack has severely criticized Oe’s writing as doing exactly the opposite of what he intended it to do—attack the emperor system at the centre of Japanese culture. Instead of being more like third world/postcolonial writers who deconstruct grand narratives, Oe destroys only to reconstruct his own versions that are still trapped within the same anti-western, anti-modernist paradigms Japan has continued to use to justify its uniqueness. While there may be some truth in these allegations, they are only valid if we accept the very standards they set up to knock down. In particular is the attack of “postcolonial” and “postmodern” critics (such as David Pollack’s *Reading Against Culture*) on essentialist or false universalities of culture; cultural imperialism must be replaced with a more encompassing “tolerant” and “multicultural” politics of identity.

In Oe’s texts, almost every attempt at violent revolution or civil disobedience ends disastrously for those involved. Both *Manen Gannen no Futtoboru (The Silent Cry)* and *Dojidai Gemu (Contemporary Games)* represent examples of impotent violence that ends in self-destruction for those who “act” and alienation for those who remain passive (although Oe seems to suggest that for those who remain passive there is a future chance at redemption). The dilemma Oe exposes in the hearts of his characters trapped in a bind is the decision to act (and possibly perish) or to stay passive (and live on your knees). Sartre has described such a “choice” as false; there is no freedom in such a choice-either way leads to existential or real death. However, in this “fight” or “flight” situation Oe consciously or unconsciously reveals something unexpected. What degree and type of violence does Oe accept in order to resist the cultural imperialism that Said exposes and that he sees at work in Japan?

² Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London, Continuum), 1987, p. 323

One answer may be found in another correspondence, this time with Susan Sontag. Oe refers to an article written by Sontag in the *New York Times Magazine* in which she says that not all violence should be criticized the same way and that not all wars are unjust, in connection with the NATO bombing of Sarajevo. In reaction to Sontag's complete support for NATO bombings Oe explains his own position to a group of young Japanese students by asking: "is there any other way to stop what Milosovich has started? One cannot understand Sontag's comments without understanding the dark irony at the heart of all civilization. Japan is now officially supporting the US invasion—do you support or resist the fascist wars enclosing the national borders of Asian countries? Neutrality is not possible. Can we think of a third way—shouldn't we think about this?" Oe is clearly against supporting the US invasion, but he is more slippery when it comes to agreeing outright with the violent bombing of Sarajevo; after all, the title of his book is "Writing Against Violence". More ambiguous is Oe's reference to a "third way"—what exactly does he mean by a third way, and what is the "dark irony at the heart of all civilization"?

In order to answer these questions we need to reconsider Oe's repeated solidarity with Said, and in particular, his praise for *Culture and Imperialism*. Said is a comparative literary critic, but is perhaps best known for *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, his commentary on the relationship between empire and the third world (what would later become the full-blown version of postcolonial studies). This area of research looks at the structures that maintain unequal power relationships between the centre (empire) and periphery (third world) after decolonization has, on the whole, been completed. That is to say, Said's concern is with the political and historical manipulation of pauperized countries from the east and south, via cultural (mainly literary) structures from the west that deceptively work to continue the master/slave paradigms born in the age of empire. It is no secret that Oe sees Japan as a peripheral country; but it may come as a surprise to many that he also sees it as a "third world" country. In a speech in 1986 at Duke University, entitled "Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma" Oe made the following comment:

"I come to you today as one Japanese writer who feels that Japanese literature may be decaying. A confession like this by a writer from the third world will undoubtedly disappoint an audience that is expecting a genuine "challenge," given the theme of our discussion: "The Challenge of Third World Culture" ... Japan appeared on the international scene as a third-world nation in about 1868. Ever since, in the process of modernizing, it has been blatantly hostile to its fellow third-world nations in Asia, as evidenced by its annexation of Korea and its war of aggression against China."³

To refer to Japan as a "third world" country in 1986, right at the height of its economic success, is no doubt problematic. Moreover, it should not be ignored that the term itself never existed in 1868 and therefore the association of Japan to "fellow" third world countries is out of place; at least, until we understand what Oe meant by the term "third-world". Japan's modernizing and "civilizing process" involved the wholesale importation of western technology, ideological, political and social structures. The internalization of western imperialism and colonial discourse and then the externalizing of this to justify its own colonial pursuits led Japan into a savage war, ending in total destruction and defeat. After

³ Oe, Kenzaburo. *Japan, The Ambiguous, And Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures* (Kodansha, Tokyo) p.59

the war, the rebuilding of the country, with the help of the United States and the Korean War, allowed Japan to regenerate its economy to become second to the US. “Because of its wealth,” Oe argues, “Japan is now considered a member of the advanced nations, but it is not an independent country with plans of its own—plans to establish world peace.”⁴ For Oe “wealth” does not necessarily mean direct access to the status of “advanced” or “first world” nations. For him, the third world represents something quite different: a mind set or understanding of association or position in the world. But more importantly, as he seems to suggest in the above quote, it means a lack of independence or sovereignty.

Oe sees Japan as a client state of the US, which is not far from the truth; one only has to look at the number of US bases in Japan to realize that it is still, indeed, a client of the US. The United States/Japan Security Treaty forced through the government by Kishi Nobusuke (the class A war criminal and grandfather of Abe Shinzo), which has prolonged the presence of US forces in Japan, is symptomatic of the parasitical, symbiotic relationship between Japan and the US and is a concern that Oe has continued to tackle in his novels and essays. Perhaps it is for these reasons he feels an affinity with Said, and his criticism of cultural imperialism à la the US. As Gavan McCormick has cogently argued the Japanese government and affiliated associations have continued to assert nationalism reminiscent of the fascist paradigms and ideologies used to mobilize the population during WWII—ideologies that were reinvested to mythic proportions by the US during its occupation. The “one dimensional” ideologies, Oe argues, have been embraced by the Japanese government to the extent that it has broken constitutional laws and sent Self Defense Forces to Iraq in direct defiance of Article 9.⁵ Oe points out in his letter to Said that the relationship between the US and Japan mirrors the imperialist cultural domination described in *Culture and Imperialism* and offers “writing against” this kind of violence as a form of dissent.

Oe’s life long work has been to expose the ‘dark irony’ of the human condition at the heart of the west’s attempts to civilize the barbarians. In his early novella *The Catch*, for example, he describes the civilizing process (or *Bunmei Kaika*) that Japan went through in the mid to late 19th century as a form of domesticating violence. Near the end of the second world war, when a black airman crash-lands in a remote village on the island of Shikoku he is taken captive and reared like an animal in a cage by the villagers. The imagery depicts the black soldier as a wild beast, slowly tamed by the villagers, alongside images of wild dogs “regressing” back to wolves. The “civilized” people from the town are squared off with the dirty, wild villagers, but the main backdrop that frames this racist regression from human to animal is obviously the war. Under the thin veneer of civilization lays a suppressed violence that once forced into a corner is released in catastrophic proportions. Indeed, once almost a part of the village, the black airman “regresses” back to a wild beast and is finally slain, but in the process the narrator is severely maimed by his own father. The resentment and suspicion of adults that many of Oe’s characters show leads back to this aborted initiation into adulthood, leaving the children angry and impotent, as if the fight had been literally beaten out of them. The only alternative to alienation is uncontrolled rage and directionless violence. Almost all of Oe’s protagonists suffer from a dire sense of melancholia; their ‘incomplete mourning’ at the loss of childhood leads them back time and again to the site of the traumatic event framed by the brutality of war. It is no surprise then that Oe constantly returns to the village (the “scene of the crime”) to investigate, not unlike a forensic scientist, the birth of modern Japan.

⁴ Ibid, p.62

⁵ Oe. Kenzaburo, *Boryoku ni Sakaratte Kaku* (Asahi Shinbunsha, Tokyo) p. 268

In order to move beyond the boundaries of narrow views such as civilized/barbarian Oe paints a more nuanced, ambivalent view of Japan as 'ambiguous'. In his first full-length novel *Our Age* (*Warera no Jidai* (1959) he criticizes the government crack down on student movements of the late 1950s in Japan. On the whole, student activism in the early 60s was non-violent and only turned nasty when right wing thugs, employed by the government, were used to agitate and harangue the opposition. Instead of making the important distinction between the non-violent students and government-sponsored brutality, mainstream media outlets published a joint declaration condemning violence in general. Later it was found that certain newspaper editors were threatened with violence from right wing and ultra nationalist groups. The outcome was a skewed description of reality. But Oe takes this one-sided issue deeper. In *Our Age* he introduces the anti-American sentiment held by both left and right wing students and shows how adherence to the emperor system as a form of xenophobia and ethnocentrism could be redirected towards minorities within Japan, particularly Zainichi Koreans. In fact *Our Age* correctly predicts this transference of racial hatred.

In the build up to the revision of the US/Japan Security Treaty in 1960 a subtle but evident change in sentiment occurred. Students and laborers who once cried "Democracy Now" and "Respect the Constitution" were now carrying anti-US placards and shouting racist slogans. Journalist and social critic Eto Jun wrote at the time that what Japan was experiencing was another Sonno Joi incident. Sonno Joi, or "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians" was the clarion call given by the anti-Bakufu samurai in an attempt to build fear in the masses and take advantage of this by trying to overthrow the Tokugawa regime. They used the threat of colonization by the European powers to rally the farmers and peasants against the Bakufu, while at the same time dealt directly with the very European powers in matters of trade, in particular the purchase of guns. This glaring contradiction, or double-dealing, was not lost on Oe. In perhaps his most well known novel *The Silent Cry* Oe employs a mixture of both historic and mythic narratives in order to condense time and make some startling comparisons. In particular, Oe's comparison between Japan's forced opening to the US at gunpoint prior to the Meiji Restoration and the US-Japan clientelism as a result of the neo-colonial US/Japan Security Treaty is revealing. After Japan was forced into an unfair trade agreement with the US and European powers, in order to satisfy the status of 'modern nation state' it annexed Korea, colonized Ryukyu (Okinawa) and Hokkaido and invaded Taiwan. Almost 100 years later, in 1960, after the failure to prevent the Security Treaty revision the anti-US rhetoric was replaced with anti-Korean slurs in the build up to the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea signed in 1965. Oe exposes the violent racism of the anti-Korean ferment in the mid 1960s and traces it back to the beginnings of Japan's civilizing process from the Meiji period. In Oe's stories, hidden under the thin veneer of civilization, lurks a strong sense of inferiority and impotence mainly towards the US. Many of the protagonists in Oe's early stories start out as left wing non-violent students, but gradually these feelings of stagnation, inferiority at being 'Japanese', and impotence lead them to convert to the right wing and carry out vicious, if not meaningless, acts of violence. It is not too much to say that Oe's characters suffer from a severely fractured sense of self, split between Japan and the US. While Japan is geographically located in Asia, its strident support for the US in the Korean War and later the war in Vietnam suggests Oe's portrayal of a schizophrenic national identity may not be too far off the mark. Oe's solidarity with Edward Said and the Palestinian cause is clearly connected to his own concerns about the role the US is playing in deciding the future of Japan.

For example, in *Our Age* Oe harshly criticizes the left wing's blind solidarity and adoption

of anti-colonial violence used in countries such as Algeria and Egypt (during the late 1950s) and instead offers harnessing the power of language as a 'third way' to fight against the "soft fascism" and ultra nationalism of postwar Japan. However, at the same time, Oe believes that it is better to sacrifice oneself for tolerance than it is to die fighting against intolerance. The Christian idea of turning the cheek is important in Oe's works, as can be seen in his praising of Blake and Dante. Interestingly enough, however, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a character in any of Oe's works who reflects these beliefs of tolerance. Almost every character is torn between action/inaction and violence/impotence. In this respect tolerance may be the ideal, but for Oe it is always something constantly in the process of 'be-coming'. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless difficult to reconcile the extreme violence in his writing with his ideals of tolerance. In his novels Oe argues that Japanese need to purge themselves of the hidden violence (under the civilized front) in the form of the US/Japan Security Treaty and the emperor system. In fact, in many of his early stories Oe goes as far as to suggest that the AMPO treaty is the new '*Kokutai*' (Polity) for Japanese because it sits above the emperor, the very 'symbol' of Japanese cultural uniqueness. In this respect, the United States represents the very exception to the rule that utilizes the emperor system in order to manipulate the sovereign rights of Japanese. To break free from this must involve a kind of violence met upon oneself—an almost masochistic beating-up of the ego in order to move beyond one's own boundaries, in a sense, a 'de-colonizing' of the imagination, if Japanese want to be free from the social restrictions embedded in their unconscious in the form of a blind acceptance of the US and the emperor system.

For these reasons, Oe's understanding of 'tolerance' is dialectical as it relies on the Hegelian 'negation of a negation'. Clearly it is the reader's responsibility to negate the negation, and this is why Oe's books are so unsettling; the reader is defamiliarized with bizarre characters, complicated syntax and semantics that unravel any possibility of arriving at the horizon of meaning. He avoids violent domestication via a tripartite translation technique that creates new words somewhere 'in-between' the source language (usually French or English) and the target language (Japanese), what has elsewhere been coined as a kind of 'third code'.⁶ The paradox, to repeat the important point here, is that in order for Oe to do all of this he must employ his own form of 'structural' violence upon language, which is not at all tolerant of comfortable binary oppositions.

In conclusion, Said's influence on Oe can be seen in the way he adopts words and concepts from Said's books to extrapolate on the dilemma faced by Japan, and the human condition in general. This involves a violent de-centring and relocating of words and concepts, but a necessary violence that is secondary to the overwhelmingly greater violence of the structures of imperialism and fascism. Here Oe's tolerance paradoxically involves intolerance to standardizations, be they historical, cultural, or metaphysical. The 'third way' is an attempt to move beyond the false choices of simple violence and impotency towards a continual process of 'be-coming'. For is this not the true order of democracy?

⁶ Linn Øverås *In Search of the Third Code: An Investigation of Forms in Literary Translation in Meta*, XLIII, 4, 1998