



An Analysis of the Image of Bird in the Novel "*A Personal Matter*"

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Abstract. The image of the protagonist Bird in the novella "*A Personal Matter*" created by Kenzaburo Oe, a Japanese writer, remains as the focus of many scholars. At the end of the novel, the image of the protagonist Bird changed remarkably from an unconscious plantlike person at the beginning to a person who actively endures life and bravely takes responsibility for others. Based on analyzing the image of Bird in the early period and later period, the author of the paper focuses on the reasons that lead to the change, hoping to better understand Kenzaburo Oe's overall literary thought.

Keywords: Kenzaburo Oe, *A Personal Matter* Image of Bird, View of Futility

1 Introduction

Kenzaburo Oe, the Japanese writer, published his novella "*A Personal Matter*" in 1964. In the following year, the work is awarded the 11th Shinchosha Literary Prize. In addition to that, the novel was spread by word of mouth among readers. Meanwhile, many Japanese critics, including the seven judges of Shinchosha Literary Prize, felt that the image of the protagonist, Bird, changed too abruptly at the end. About the controversy, there have been lots of relevant studies previously, in which the researchers studied the transformation of the image of Bird from the perspectives like "existential self-selection" [1], "postwar democracy and oriental social understanding" [2], "the ignition of sex and life" [3], and "imprisonment view" [4]. To

clarify the transformation of the image of the protagonist Bird can help sort out the ideological meaning of the novel, and also serve as a guide for in-depth understanding of Kenzaburo Oe's overall literary thought. Hence, on the basis of previous studies, the paper focuses on analyzing the image of Bird in the early period and later period, and then analyzing the reasons for this transformation, and finally putting forward the view that the transformation of Bird is closely related to his understanding of "the futility of escape".

2 First, the Image of Bird in the Early Period and Later Period

Bird in the novel was originally a man who felt estranged from human civilization and the only thing that he was craving to do was to go to Africa. Apart from the passion to go to Africa, he had no other feelings like excitement or tension, not even when his wife was going to deliver their baby. If there was something in him, it was a negative sense of confusion and unease. There was a deep estrangement between Bird and everyone he met. Among his previous classmates and peers, Bird was like an alien. Although they all lived in the city, he had a strange face resembling a bird; besides, he suffered mental problems. He was a disjointed existence from society. Even with his relatives, there was also a gap: his wife was in labor, but he only took it as a kind of pressure and cumbrance, worrying that he was no longer free. As for "telephoning his mother-in-law at the hospital every hour since three that afternoon", Bird took it as a task, feeling bored and annoyed. As for his father-in-law, Bird saw him as a source of stress, describing him as "a giant presence" [5]. "Bird did not want to disappoint him all over again", not due to the inner conscience or emotion, but more because of fear. Bird couldn't communicate with normal people in society. Meanwhile, there was also a gap between him and other alienated people in society. When Bird went out from the bookstore selling maps of Africa, he met a woman dressed as a paraphasia. The male prostitute "had been on the verge of discovering a bond of mutual interest, but had realized abruptly that Bird was not an appropriate partner in the bond". It can be seen that at the beginning of the novel, Bird only existed passively as the son-in-law of his father-in-law and the husband of his wife. He tried to fulfill the task according to the social and cultural code as the head of a family, to support himself, his wife and child; and telephoned his mother-in-law who accompanied his wife in labor in accordance with the mode that normal people did. The motivation of all his actions at that time was not out of his own will, but from the

external oppression of others. Bird at that time only existed as a person without self, a person bound by social relations, showing completely the image of a "being in himself" [6], a "weak young man looking like an old man" [7].

However, at the end of the novel, Bird presented a completely different image from the original image mentioned above. In the end, Bird didn't escaped from the present nor hoped for the future of freedom; instead he bravely faced the real world. In the end, Bird saved his deformed baby from the abortionist, and refused his mother-in-law's request to secretly dispose of the baby; instead he chose to lead a courageous and responsible life and took practical actions for it. Bird decided to be a guide for foreign tourists, and had the willingness to work. When he decided to open his eyes to his misfortune and continue to endure the rest in the future, his previous self-deception disappeared along with Himiko's "multi-universes" [8]. Then Bird had the power to live spontaneously and actively, and going to Africa was no longer something hard to realize or his only ardent hope of life. Besides, Africa was no longer the "last refuge" for Bird, but became the destination of his positive aspirations after he chose to bravely face life. In the transformation from passive living to positive living, Bird was no longer a person being pushed away by the circumstances. Meanwhile, the barriers between Bird and the normal human society were eliminated. In the final dialogue with his father-in-law, Bird won his father-in-law's approval: "A childish nickname like Bird doesn't suit you anymore" [9]. His wife's greetings, his mother-in-law's smiling gaze, his father-in-law's warm voice of relative affection and their "kindred warmth" all demonstrated the vanishing of the estrangement between Bird and his family members[10].

3 Second, Reasons for the Transformation of the Image of Bird

The tremendous change in the image of Bird happened after his dialogue with Kikuhiko, an old friend once abandoned by Bird. On the surface, Kikuhiko was relieved about Bird 's abandonment: "I made that decision myself. So the responsibility is all my own" [11], but in the follow-up dialogue, his condemnation and complaint still clearly showed his concern for Bird's abandonment. Because of that, Kikuhiko's life was falling since then. Compared to that, the life of Bird who abandoned Kikuhiko, were supposed to be on the rise, right? In fact, it's not the case, Bird constantly abandoned all kinds of people who made him feel burdened; however

his life wasn't "on the rise" [12], but continuously went descent. It's this point that made Bird realize his escape all the time meant nothing at all.

The so-called escape occurs when the subject does not want to face something, which might bear the uncontrollable factors and break the existing situation, generate fear, and bring the unknown. On the other hand, the reason that people want to maintain the existing situation is that the existing situation is at least not bad for the subject in addition to the subject's inertia, sluggishness and fear of unknown changes. However, in the case of Bird, the various existing conditions that Bird was desperately trying to maintain were not good at all: dropping out of graduate school; relying on his father-in-law to find a living job; and being despised by outsiders and unable to integrate into his family, there was nothing in Bird's existing life worth his guarding by escape. Hence, in Kikuhiko's gay bar, after Bird puked up the whiskey in his stomach on the counter, he finally realized that what he ran away from the baby to protect was "nothing." Bird has nothing at all, and his life was pure desolation in the original condition which he was desperately trying to maintain. Before the baby was born, Bird's life was a meaningless blank. In the area composed of meaninglessness, Bird fled from one end to the other; but in fact, no matter where he was, the empty space was just empty, and his life was full of meaninglessness. The escape of Bird was an entirely futile behavior.

Bird's understanding of the "futility of escape" provided him with a powerful inner spiritual drive for change. What's more, his change was also related to his external experience of embarrassment at that time. When Bird realized futility in Kikuhiko's gay bar, he was just expelled from the cram-school for his hangover the day before. Bird had nothing else to lose, and he had absolutely nothing. All the inertia in the past had pushed him to fall to the lowest point where he couldn't be worse, and change often occurred when there was no retreat. It was then that he realized his disabled baby needed him to take responsibility and arrange the brain surgery. It was this opportunity that gave Bird the right push when he needed it most. In this way, the three factors, i.e. the subjective spiritual will of "wanting to change", the external objective reality that "couldn't be worse", and the external force that "needs to take responsibility for it", all made Bird finally broke away from the existing track and no longer went around in vain; instead, he jumped out and reinvented himself by taking the opportunity to be responsible for his disabled baby, thus transforming from "being pushed" to moving on his own initiative.

4 Conclusions

To sum up, it can be found that in the novel "A Personal Matter", the image of Bird has indeed undergone a great change at the end, from a completely unconscious plant-like person at the beginning to a person who actively tolerates life and bravely takes responsibility for others. But this change is not without any reason, but occurs in the long-term accumulation and brewing of the situation. In the eyes of the author, there are three reasons for his change: the strong spiritual will after realizing "the futility of escape", the external objective situation that is "irreversible", and the circumstance of "being needed by his disabled baby". The three factors work together from both internal and external perspectives, making Bird finally change. In addition, in the course of the study, the author also gradually realized that in addition to "the futility of escape", Bird's view of futility also includes "the futility of goals". The "futility" at this level is related to Kenzaburo Oe's internal concept of time in his literature; however, due to the limitations of time and ability, it is not studied in detail in this paper, hoping that the following studies may continue to explore it in depth in the future.

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