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Critical Writing Skills: A Review of Kenzabure Oe's *Silent Cry*

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Abstract

Some upcoming critical writers and students confuse reviews for book summaries and reports for the sole purpose of marketing the story to the audience. Even in high institutions of learning, students write book reports with name of publisher, price of the book, major characters, dominant themes, styles and impact of the story. Allyson Skene defines a review as the writer's interpretation of a work of art. He underscores the importance of the thesis statement in the interpretation of a work of a text. Whereas a book report gives a summary of events in a story, a review gives the main argument and a summary is only given to support the thesis. This paper is a review Kenzabure Oe's *Silent Cry*. Using the ideas of Allyson Skene and other literary scholars, it demonstrates the components of a critical book review.

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Introduction

At elementary levels of education, a book review is defined as brief summary that gives prospective readers an idea of a story. Nyongesa and Omwocha (2017) observe that a book review entails the writer's report on the preamble, title, setting, character, plot, style, structure, subject and impact. The preamble involves short note that appear at the beginning of the review to indicate the title, author, year of publication, name of the reviewer, price of the book and publisher. The writer then makes a description of each of the aforementioned elements of layout to complete the review. Menza Education and Research Foundation Guide also propose this model for young reviewers. Apart from young reviewers, the model is commonly used by journalists to write reviews aimed at marketing newly published books. Serious critical writers poised for thoughtful critical evaluation should desist from this journalistic model. Skene and other literary scholars at higher education levels such as Texas Wesleyan University define a book review is a thoughtful, educated assessment of a story supported by evidence. He adds that it is neither a judgment of a book and author nor a book report. A book report gives a plot summary but in a review a summary is only incorporated to support the thesis or just a brief section at the beginning of the review. Unlike the journalistic model, language scholars at UNC College of arts and Sciences analyse the parts of a review as follows:

The introduction

Skene and other modern literary scholars generally observe that the introduction of a book review should include the name of the author, title of the book, brief summary of the book, books objectives and the thesis statement. If the summary is longer than five sentences, the writer should then spare a paragraph for it. The summary should include information and context that is relevant to the thesis statement. If the writer is reviewing John Ruganda's *Shreds of Tenderness*, the theses could be:

- i). Those who commit crimes against humanity are callous and should be punished
- ii). The claim that refugees are cowards is wrong; they are in fact more courageous than stayees.

The summary for thesis one could trace events surrounding Odie and Mohamed Ali and the way they commit crimes against humanity. Summary of the second thesis should trace events surrounding Wak and the way he faces situations courageously in exile.

Thesis statement

Skene observes that a book review is designed to tell readers how the reviewer interprets the book by evaluating whether the author met his or her objectives. The reviewer should interrogate the author's claims and state whether or not they are valid. For instance the claim that refugees are more courageous than stayees is quite questionable. The interrogation should be supported with evidence from the text. A thesis statement should not be based on feelings (I really liked the book). It should be about the major claims in the book. Skene and other language and literary scholars generally propose the following approaches to a thesis statement:

i). Insight into a philosophy, theory or social issue

This means that literary texts give insight into theories for instance split personality

or Bailey's theory of fragmentation in Oe's *Silent Cry* and Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*. The characters demonstrate contradictory personalities to demonstrate that their bodies are controlled by diverse persons. Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* can be interpreted under Marxist, psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives.

ii). Author's Purpose and whether it was achieved.

A thesis can be found by critiquing author's ability or in ability to achieve the purpose. The critical writer should give evidence to support the claim.

iii). How the text relates to author's other works

The reviewer can compare and contrast the book to other books by the author: For example,

In this novel, Ngugi wa Thiong'o explores postcolonial issues like all his other works; however, unlike the former works that are based on class struggles, the struggle between the marginal and dominant group in this novel is based on gender.

iv). Why you enjoyed reading the text

Does the book add to any classical theories of literature?

The book is useful because it introduces new insights into postcolonial concepts of cultural hybridity and cultural essentialism (orientalism).

1.3 Body paragraphs

Each paragraph of the review should present a claim to prove the thesis statement and incorporate examples from the text as evidence. A variety of elements in a book can be considered for evaluation and the elements should be related to the thesis for example, setting, the subject, major characters, major conflict and style

A Review of Kenzabure Oe's *Silent Cry*

Oe's *Silent Cry* is a heart rending story of the causes and consequences of split personality in the lives of victims. Oe wants to educate his audience how a sickness that society has ignored causes untold suffering to members of families in Japan and the world over.

Silent Cry is a story of Mitsusaburo Nedokoro, his brother Takashi and their mentally retarded sister. They hail from Shikoku valley, Japan near Korea. Mitsusaburo is a professional English translator who abandons his job after his friend commits suicide under mysterious circumstances. The ordeal traumatises Mitsusaburo so much that he withdraws from society. The complicated relationship between Mitsusaburo and Takashi is another possible cause of trauma and the consequent psychological anomaly in both. In their childhood, their mother favoured Takashi by saying that when they grow up, Takashi would be handsome and appreciated by people but Mitsusaburo would be ugly (19). After their parents' death, the uncle favours Takashi and sister by adopting them; Mitsusaburo remains at home. While at the uncle's home, Takashi gets sexually involved with the sister; she conceives Takashi's child. The uncle arranges an abortion and has her sterilized to avoid a future mess. She has hardly recovered from the abortion when she asks Takashi to have sex with her. Takashi declines and feeling rejected, she darts to the toilet and commits suicide. Forthwith, Takashi's mind begins disintegrating. He develops a crazy desire to relive his great grandfather's younger brother's life. He was a rebel leader who led farmers in the 1860 uprising. He also imitates his departed elder brother, S, a former soldier in the Second World War who is killed after instigating a row between the villagers

and Koreans. In long narrations embellished in extravagant exaggerations, Takashi romanticizes S and grandfather's younger brother to Mitsusaburo's dismay. He can only guess that Takashi has psychological problems. In the weird desire to be like his elder brother S, he leads the villagers of Shikoku Valley to raid a supermarket. On the third day of the uprising, (like his grandfather's young brother) it comes to Mitsusaburo's knowledge that Takashi has been having sex with his brother's wife, Natsumi and he claims to have raped and killed a girl (just as his elder brother S did). The young footballers desert him and as the government prepares for to arrest him, he joins Mitsusaburo in his room, confesses the causes of his trauma and proceeds to commit suicide. The story ends when Natsumi has conceived Takashi's child and wants Mitsusaburo to take a job in Africa and together raise their idiotic son and Takashi's unborn child.

The subject of the novel is the cause and consequence of split personality in the lives of people in our society. Ertin (2006) refers to split personality as dissociative identity disorder and defines it as a mental condition in which two or more separate identities control a person's behaviour patterns, memories and consciousness (1). Ertin singles out social restrictions as the major causes of split personality. Children are compelled to accept whatever adults say and do. Douglas (1973) defines socialization as learning about and accepting the valid norms of society (169). Where a young person finds it difficult to inculcate the norms, this condition may arise. Hawthorn (1993) points out the triggering elements of split personality as familial constrictions, morality, religious belief, childhood trauma and adult trauma (17). Adult trauma for men stems from war, unemployment and financial crisis and women from sexual experiences and contradictory personal relationships. Morality and religion cause conflict between society and individuals. According to Harrison L (2006), trauma produces a fragmentation of the core personality into a number of personalities as a creative response to severe distress (2). Citing Bailey A (1942), she refers to the fragmentation process as an "abstraction". Bailey adds that sometimes more than two persons are concerned upon the inner side of life use the same physical body- the person has multiple identities, the main cause of which is a definite weakness in the etheric connection of the original dweller or dweller's great dislike for physical incarnation. In other words, when the person hates the conditions of his life, then etheric connection is weakened thereby making him exposed to other dwellers. It may also be caused by some shock or disaster that suddenly severs the link of consciousness. Bailey (1942) therefore defines fragmentation theory as "vacating of the physical body by the indwelling consciousness as a result of that dweller's great dislike for physical incarnation or shock and disaster. Individuals who experience severe physical and sexual trauma develop such dislike or have a traumatic response to shock and disaster that effects a disconnection in consciousness. Spira (1996) enumerates common factors in the development of split personality: Severe ongoing abuse, ability to easily absorb into abstract imagery, having no other persons to count on for support, comfort and protection, being a female child and the perception of continuous suffering with no way out.

The symptoms of split personality include two or more distinct identities that control the individual, the distinct identities have their own age, sex, posture, gestures, way of talking and the patient switches to the one he wants; depression, mood swings, sleep disorders, appeals to self punishment, night terrors, sleep walking, anxiety, phobias, hallucinations- seeing things that are not real and delusions- believing

things that are not real. Split personality may result into depersonalization- a sense of being detached from one's body or out of body experiences, derealization- a feeling that the world is not real, amnesia- failure to recall significant personal information and self punishment- the feeling that one must punish himself because he is guilty of wrong doing. H/she does not want to enjoy a moment of peace.

In Oe's *Silent Cry*, Takashi's charisma and charm gives him the outer image of success and happiness; nonetheless, he sustained an emotional wound from the childhood sexual escapade that has eaten him all his life. As Hawthorn observes, social restrictions and morality constrain people from having sexual relations with siblings and that is why Takashi becomes extremely guilty of his sexual experience with her sister. He declines her advances and when she commits suicide, Takashi holds himself responsible for his sister's death. With constant guilt and trauma, he undergoes a fragmentation; his core personality vacates due the weakening of the etheric connection and two persons replace the vacuum: his grandfather's younger brother and his elder brother, S. This accounts for Takashi's obsession with the two persons and he acts their roles perfectly. The constant overstatement of their acts of heroism confounds Mitsusaburo. It is he who was present at the time S was killed and did not witness some of the exaggerations that Takashi narrates. In his diary, he writes to defend S, "[i]t was alright to violate a young woman as long as one took the proper steps afterward...kill her," (216). Later, he leads the young men like S before him to loot the emperor's supermarket because he is a Korean. He fabricates a rumour that he has raped and killed a young woman to aptly fit in S shoes. There is also evidence of their grandfather's younger brother's consciousness in Takashi's life. A rebel leader who led a feudal revolt in 1860 and romoured to have fled to America, he influences Takashi to go to the United States and lead a strike to oppose the American president's visit to Japan (12). Later he leads the young men in what he names the Takashi Uprising to act the feudal revolt.

Takashi's mental condition has inculcated in him a passion for violence to invent a punishment for his sins. Mitsusaburo tells him:

You are hoping to punish yourself for the incest and death of an innocent person that is brought about...I am hoping that if that fantasy should become a reality, the two sides of your personality would come together again in death (240).

The choice of characters in the novel contributes effectively to split personality as a theme. Although Mitsusaburo's split is not as severe as Takashi's, in Laing's terms, he is possibly a schizoid. In his concept of "the unembodied self" Laing (1965) expounds that the schizoid's self is detached from the body; the individual disentangled is from his body and achieves a desired state of disincarnate spirituality. The body is not the core self, it is the core of a false self, which a disembodied "inner self" looks on with tenderness or hatred. Such a divorce of self from body deprives the unembodied self direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world. Traumatized, Mitsusaburo resigns from his job after his friend's death and shies away from all social activities. The narrator describes him as the outsider who can only criticize Takashi's evil acts but cannot do anything. After getting the news that Takashi has had sex with his wife, he says:

I knew in fact that unless he described it in detail, the thing would have no reality for me and I wouldn't be able to react properly. The blood had rushed to my head, where it pounded noisily but my consciousness merely

drifted about in it, unable to hitch itself either to jealousy or any other practical reaction. (209)

Apparently, Mitsusaburo is so disembodied that he is incapable of normal human feelings like jealousy and anger. He is only capable of a mental reaction and his consciousness and Bailey observes in not ingrained in his body. He says the consciousness drifts about hence exposing his body to any other dweller. His loss of sexual desire in marriage further demonstrates his disembodied state. He says the "impossibility of sex had eaten at the heart of our married life like a cancer," (217). Bailey describes this as a consciousness strongly oriented in directions other than those of physical existence. In other words, Mitsusaburo's trauma has wrung out of him the passion for life so much as to lose interest in rewards of life. The existence of queer sex habits like masturbation even with a wife in his house further illustrates his fragmented state (1). Having failed to connect with his wife, Natsumi, he turns to himself, as schizoids do. The foreign dwellers that have displaced the core personality are of opposite sexes and can have sex with each other. Unlike Takashi's split, which stems from sexual experiences, Mitsusaburo's split arises from childhood trauma and shock. At a young age, her mother had blurted, [b]ut by and by Mitsusaburo will be ugly and Takashi will be handsome. People will like Takashi and he will lead a successful life," (19). These words infiltrate his subconscious and cause untold psychological trauma. With the lapse of time, his conscious vacates and leaves an empty shell leading to psychological anomalies that result in self sex. His friend's queer suicide shocks him and he gets severely fragmented.

The setting of the novel, Japan after the Second World War, contributes to the psychological anomalies such as split personality. Hawthorn observes that adult trauma for men stems from war, unemployment and financial (17). The Second World War inflicted the Japanese with severe trauma whose psychological consequence is split personality. Oe probably witnesses many cases that inspire him to write the novel. The suicide motif in the novel depicts the internal fragmentation that characters have undergone as a consequence of the split. It begins with Mitsusaburo's sister who is mentally retarded; the mother, before her death, observes that she is incapable of surviving without attaching herself to someone. Her attachment to Takashi results to incest and suicide for fear of rejection. Mitsusaburo's friend also commits suicide in a queer manner- he paints his head crimson, inserts a cucumber in his anus and hangs himself (18). Finally, Takashi cannot reconcile his split as a result of childhood trauma and commits suicide. The Nekodoro's are a family struggling with the consequences of the Second World War. Their father was killed in Japanese incursion of Manchuria in 1934 and elder brother during the Korean Crisis. The idiocy motif is possibly the genetic mutations that resulted from nuclear bomb. Mitsusaburo's sister and child are mentally retarded.

The major conflict in the novel is internal fragmentation of the consciousness as a result of trauma. All the characters that commit suicide in the novel undergo inner split of their core personality, which Oe refers to as *Silent Cry*. Mitsusaburo's friend for instance terminated his postgraduate studies at Columbia University and admitted at the asylum. At the centre, they were given tranquilizers and trained to smile. The nurse takes advantage to assault them physically. One day, Mitsusaburo's friend stops using tranquilizers and beats the nurse up and he is expelled from the asylum. He comes home and commits suicide. Towards the end of the story,

Mitsusaburo tells us that his friend could not share something “inside” him (269) hence was the queer manner of his suicide. He suggests that there was one person that condemned the other so severely as a result of some unforgivable act he had committed. He says they died “in the grip of fear they could communicate to no one else” (p.79). The same fragmentation affects Takashi driving him to his end. Mitsusaburo tells him, “[t]he two sides of your personality would come together again in death” (240).

The major stylistic devices in the novel are the first person narrator and monologues, which effectively depict psychological anomalies in characters. By using the first person narrator, Mitsusaburo, the writer distances himself from the story and characters independently explore their mental sicknesses. The prime mover, Mitsusaburo, for instance, analyses Takashi’s condition and tells him that the split within his core personality compels him to seek self punishment. The first narrator point of view enables the readers to understand the characters’ psychological predicament without the authorial intrusion. The long speeches by characters such as Takashi offer opportunities for readers to analyse their mental conditions. Mitsusaburo acts as a psychiatrist interviewing his patient; he directs him with a few prodding questions that empower Takashi explore his situation. He comes to realize the cause of his violence- the sexual affair of the sister and the subsequent suicide.

Oe’s *Silent Cry* is therefore a story of the causes and consequences of split personality or dissociative identity disorder. The characters undergo internal fragmentation because of trauma that results from war, sexual experiences, unemployment, financial problems and other causes. It is the inability of characters to reconcile the split that compels them to commit suicide. It is confounding to learn that some strains of split personality like Takashi’s unconsciously compel the person to get involved in deviant or risky acts to obtain self punishment. Through his careful choice of characters and style, Kenzaburo Oe effectively depicts the theme of split personality.

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