

**Militerrorism:
Atrocious tragedy of war
depicted in Abe Kobo's "*Records of a transformation*"¹**

Debashrita Ghosh Dastidar

Tsukuba University, Japan

Historical background

"Records of a transformation" was published in Gunzo, in 1954. Even though it is a criticism of World War II (1939-1945) the author chose to write about the war after almost a decade, because finally it was a safe era to express his views on the subject. Abe Kobo has vividly depicted the war scenario using imagination and his own painful experience as a filter, reminiscent of the events of the past. Abe Kobo was 20 years old when Japan was defeated in the Second World War. Though he did not participate in the war directly, as he was living in Manchuria during that period, he was able to gather a lot of information about the war, as the Chinese Red Army, Soviet Army and the Japanese Kanto Army were surrounding the area. Though he doesn't specify the period of war but he specifies the region as China in the story. As Abe Kobo had lived in Manchuria till his adolescent age, we can consider the backdrop of the story as the Manchurian Incident.

The eruption of war between China and Japan on July 7, 1937, climaxed years of brooding hostility. In the decade after Chiang Kai-Shek established his government, Japanese Imperialism relentlessly besieged Nationalist China. Chiang Kai-Shek's efforts to establish a viable government faced the constant pressure of Japanese attacks and threats such as the Tsinian Incident of May 1928, the Manchurian Incident of May 1931, the Shanghai Fighting of 1932, the Jehol Invasion and embarrassing Tangku Truce of 1933, the Amo (Amu) Doctrine and Kuramoto

¹ This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

Incident of 1934, and the north China autonomy schemes of 1935 and 1936, which finally culminated in the outbreak of war.²

That is why even though he was not a part of the military, he was still in a position to feel and experience the horrifying crimes and atrocities taking place around him.

In this story the protagonist (I) is a soldier who gets killed in the battlefield and after that he transforms into a ghost. As a ghost he starts to describe war, as an outsider, which can be related to the position of the author observing the war without directly participating in it.

1. Introduction

In this paper the focus will be on the vision of the dead soldier, at the same time it is a repertoire of the experiences of the author himself, as he was very distressed with the war and its repercussions. A majority of the Japanese got attracted to Militarism, and they joined the army to serve the nation, consequently getting killed in the combats. In this story Kobo attempts to depict those horrifying happenings blending his own experiences, and in turn criticizing the onslaught of imperialism and nationalism.

This assessment of military roots of Japanese imperialism after 1931 was refined and given more detailed explanation by Japanese scholars in the 1960's and 70's, working from newly available official archives.³

Thus, Abe Kobo can also be considered as one of the writers who chose to write about war and devastation almost after a decade since the war ended. The reason behind this can be related to the fact that all kinds of prohibitions relating to free press and expression of thoughts were lifted. Alongside, the history of war, the significance of the existence of the spirit of the dead soldier, the lieutenant and the general is very crucial to the whole story as they represent the experiences and sufferings of human beings in extreme situations and also, the views of the author. These two aspects will be the theme of the essay.

As this story is not one of the most acclaimed works of Abe Kobo, there has not been much research related to this story. However, it is felt that it is a very important work from the point of view of war and the 'War Time' experiences of the author. In the title of the book the word [Transformation] is a very prevalent theme in most of Kobo's works. The concept of recording the views of a dead soldier can be considered as the final outcome of existence and transformation of human beings in extreme circumstances. Thus, the word TRANSFORMATION is also very metaphorical in the storyline.

² Coble, Parks. M *Facing Japan*, Council of East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991

³ Beasley, W.G. *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987

2. Defining Transformation: An interpretation of three deaths

1. Death of the narrator
2. Death of the second lieutenant
3. Death of the general

a. Death of the narrator

To argue that men are transformed by their war experiences is hardly new or startling. War literature dating to the times of Homer has attempted to explore the experiences of men who left their homes, and the known world of their cultures and civilizations, to do battle with enemies, and in the process have found themselves forced to reevaluate not only the enemy but also themselves.⁴

This story also depicts the process of psychological and physiological transformation that takes place amongst the soldiers fighting in the war. It starts with death in the battlefield, then the soul separates itself from the body, and enters a new form of existence, that of a spirit. It might seem to be a fictitious story in the beginning but as the title of the story suggests “Records of a Transformation” highlights the process of death and emphasizes the value of human existence. We see various types of death in the battlefield in this story. It depicts not only the death of the soldier or the general but also that of the innumerable civilians and their transformation. However the focus will be on the death of the narrator, second lieutenant and the general because other deaths are not described in details in the story. Their portrayal is limited to the point of building a scenario of a battlefield.

The motif of death in the story specifies that the soul’s yearning for eternal existence of the body. Also, in this story the spirit of the soldier continues to behave, as if it possesses a human body even after he is killed the battlefield. Later he boards the military truck and travels along with the other soldiers. This story not only depicts the transformation process through life -death- transformation into a spirit, but also, the background of this process and the intention of the author. In the first instance transformation brings about the image of ruthless homicide in war, which can also be related to the death of the narrator or soldier.

Before I could grasp what was happening, my nose seemed to tear off in a direction of the back of my head, and a lump of steel shot through me. And then I was dead.

P. 80

I regarded my corpse from a short distance. In the past twelve hours my body had become a mass of wrinkles, a dried-out and withered-up carcass, like a wooden carving of a wizard. Perhaps for that reason, only a small amount of blood was

⁴ White, James W. and others (Editors), *The Ambivalence of nationalism: Modern Japan between East and West*, University Press of America, 1991.

trickling from the gunshot wound. It looked as if I had grown a third eye beneath the other two. P. 80-81

The first quote depicts the killing of the narrator. It was a ruthless act by the army to leave behind a soldier to die after he is infected by Cholera. As there was no facility for medical care at that time, a soldier had no other choice but to await his death in the battlefield after getting infected by any contagious disease. Thus, the above quote portrays the moment when the narrator is killed.

As an overview the meaning of transformation in this context can be deduced as the detachment of the soul from the body. The next quotation depicts his remorse and astonishment, even though another form of transformation takes place over there before his death. After he is infected by cholera, he transformed into a mass of flesh from that of a soldier. This signifies that during war the value of human existence is reduced to an object or means of carrying out war. Thus, the above two quote state that even though the narrator was a soldier and a human being in the beginning of the story, after he gets infected his life loses its value, his body transform into a mere object which further changes into a spirit. This kind of transformation in two levels shows the brutality of war, which is narrated from a point away from the real happening.

b. Death of the Second Lieutenant

Along with the narrator another soldier is killed in cold blood in the story.

But Minami's soul was frozen in the act of dismounting from the truck, one leg on the runner and the other extended to the ground, both hands gripping the edge of the vehicle. He looked around wonderingly, caught sight of me, and made a startled gesture, as if about to speak; then he jumped off the truck, knelt protectively over his body, and burst into sobs. P. 87

The bespectacled second lieutenant called lieutenant Minami was also killed in the battlefield as he goes against the orders of his superiors. The process of his death is not described in detail as the narrator's death is explained beforehand. Lieutenant Minami is different from the narrator in the sense that he is unable to accept his death. As can be deduced from the above quote, it is going to take him sometime before he accepts the reality of his death {burst into sobs} portrays that.

On the other hand the action of Minami's bursting into tears also makes the narrator re-evaluate his own death. The narrator was trying to accept his death and being passive towards it. From this it might occur that Minami is of a weak character but compared to the narrator he represents the emotions of the majority of human race. As the narrator had seen the innumerable death in the war, he had lost his feelings towards death. But it is also important as it gives a neutral narration of the scenario. In the extreme conditions of the battlefield life and death are like the two sides of a coin.

If we reconsider the process in which the soul departs from the bodies of the two soldiers, and their longing for a human body even after death, it can be noticed that in the beginning of the story when both the soldiers are alive their body is subjected to

various tortures. Like, the narrator dies in the battlefield without even getting a drop of water and on the other hand, Minami is killed in cold blood by his own battalion. After death, their soul is free and there is no hierarchy in relationships. They don't have to abide by any norms of society. But still both of them long for human body. In this part we can relate to the Indian Philosophy of MAYA in which the human body becomes a slave to the material world and the soul desires to reside in the body for eternity.

c. Death of the General

Other than the transformation of the narrator and lieutenant Minami, there is another form of transformation, which takes place. That is the record of death and the departure of soul and re-incarnation of the general, which very crucial to the whole story.

The general, or rather the general's soul was lying next to his body, staring vacantly at the sky[...]By the time we got there, the general was gone. There was only the body of a dying Japanese child, evidently an abandoned waif, and alongside the body, its soul. But the child wasn't dead. The general's soul had apparently entered the waif's body, displacing the original soul. P. 99

He knew too much. He even knew how to steal a body. P. 100

From the above quotes it is understood that the transformation of the general was different than that of the narrator and Minami. The process of his transformation begins with death ---departure of the soul---entering another body---re-incarnation. Even the general is unable to accept his death. Even after he is killed he doesn't give up. He steals the body from the waif continues with another life. Thus, transformation takes place twice in the case of the general. And in the process the brutality of the general becomes clear. What does this signify? We will discuss it in detail in the coming chapters.

From this point we need to discuss the motif of transformation in the story in more deeply. In this story the narrator is placed outside the battlefield and is observing the various events from a distance (other world). The word transformation is providing a structure to the story and there is more in the background than the concept of body and soul. To understand this firstly we need to study the world of the dead or the other world according to the author's vision of the other world.

3. Significance of conversation between the dead soldiers

In this story the dialogue between the two dead soldiers is very important. In this section we will examine the various aspects of their conversation. On one hand Minami is adamant about rebirth while the narrator attempts at convincing him on the [freedom of soul] after death. That is whether to value ones body or the soul. As for Minami it is his only wish to get his body back, while for the narrator the possession of the body means pain and suffering, also he feels that the soul is captured within the body, which

restraints it. Their dialogue is given a supernatural feel even though they depict the reality of human existence, and the mirror image of the human and the world of the spirits. Minami is frustrated as he cannot get his body back, which is the reality of the situation. At this point reality and fiction get reversed. Fiction becomes reality and reality becomes fiction. The fictitious characters are voicing the opinion of the author. Their conversation is a criticism of the reality of war, imperialism, militarism.

Also, the actions of the dead soldiers imitating and acting as humans gives rise to a paradox. In the following passage we observe the collision of reality and fiction.

“Sir, would you like something to eat?” I called him, and he looked up, surprised.

“Can we?” he asked doubtfully.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, and sat down beside him, thinking the idea a little strange myself. [...] “I sort of feel hungry, like I could eat, but it’s only a feeling, and it probably wouldn’t work out. Still we could always pretend, sir. P. 89-90

The fact that they are still behaving and feeling as humans shows that they have not yet adopted themselves in the world of the dead, and are yet hesitant to detach themselves from the human world. The illusion of the other world is no more an illusion but a reality for both of them. The reason for this is given in the following passage.

“The reason we can’t stop imitating our bodies is not that we love them so much, but that we are trying to forget them.”

“But whatever we do to try to forget only calls upon new memories”.

“Yeah, like the heat of an august night”.

“Mosquitoes”.

“Thirst”.

“I feel like a smoke”.

“ Not only that, it’s high time we were getting sleepy”.

P. 94-95

Even though they have realized that their wish of getting their bodies back is impossible, they still cannot help but feel nostalgic about their previous life. Over here they are acting as if they have a body because they want to forget that they have lost their bodies. Their conversation is highlighting the relationship of human body and soul. In the absence of the human body, the soul is existing in an illusion of the living world , as depicted in the above lines, such as the heat of an august night, mosquitoes, thirst, feel like a smoke, and getting sleepy. The soul is incomplete without the body and vice versa. They are also commenting on human existence in extreme condition.

“See there? I am shaking with the vibrations of the truck! Just as if I had body!”

“Fathead”, he said derisively. “Didn’t you notice? Look at me. I am shaking too.

But only because I’m imagining it. The proof is that my movements don’t match the vibrations of the truck at all.

P. 91-92

Their conversation is concentrated on the subject of imitation. As they cannot accept that their bodies are no more, they keep on acting as if they still possess it. Even in the

other world they are talking, crying, moving around as they are still living. We see the build-up of a mirror image of the dead and the human world.

4. Militerrorism: Depiction of War atrocities in the dialogue of the dead soldiers.

Two things must be stressed: the dual role of the Japanese people as accomplices and victims, and the essential continuity of the story from 1868 to 1945. The war time incidents were not a thing apart, incidental sidelights that the serious historian can ignore; instead they must be seen as an integral and inevitable part of modern Japan, and unless they are recalled and analyzed, modern Japanese history becomes surgically sanitized and grossly distorted.⁵

Thus, it can be said that reanalyzing the history of war and its atrocities is a very important to understand the present. In this section we will examine the reasons behind the set-up of dead soldiers narrating the war and the atrocities of the military. The following passage will throw light to the reason.

“What do you mean, ‘cholera’, Lt, Minami? You were thinking of the soldier, weren’t you? You’re forgetting that, Lieutenant, that on the battlefield a soldier isn’t a man, he’s a trigger finger. And that soldier over there wasn’t a soldier anymore. A soldier with cholera is only a cholera masquerading as a soldier. He killed the cholera, lieutenant, for the soldier’s own sake. [...] But the value of soldier isn’t in his life. As long as our imperial army survives, every soldier lives, even if dead.

P. 82-83

In the above passage while Lt. Minami was grieving the death of the narrator, he gets scoffed by the colonel, as there was no value of his life after he got infected by Cholera, and was no more in a position to serve the imperial army. Over here we see that human lives are treated as mere objects in war. What is more dreadful is that these objects are used as a weapon to kill and destroy. Also, Lt. Minami is given a humane side compared to that of his colonel. The colonel is represented as the actual leader the battalion, who is inhuman and rigid about his Militaristic ideology. He in turn suppresses the humanity of Lt. Minami. He is the true beholder of Militaristic ideals. Thus there is a friction of values between the superior and the subordinate. The colonel imposes the ideals of the imperial army to Lt. Minami. According to him it is of highest honor for a soldier to devote his life to the army and dying for the cause of the nation, then he becomes a national hero and immortal.

Also, it becomes clear that it was important to place the narrator outside the army, as we see that the colonel imposes his view on his subordinates and they don’t have any right to make their own decision. They are just objects used to serve the purpose of the

⁵ Donald Calman, *The nature and origins of Japanese imperialism*, Routledge, London 1992.

military. They have to keep silent and obey their seniors. That is why, it is not a narration of a living soldier, as his views and ideas would be influenced by his surroundings. To maintain a neutral position it was important to have an outsider, who can give a detailed description like that of an insider. That was only possible by a spirit or an invisible man.

At the same time it is important to study the character of the Colonel who glorifies Militarism and gives no value to the lives of the soldiers.

Our mission is to cross into the mountains, hole up there, and fight to the last. Ten thousand soldiers hand-picked from every unit will rendezvous there. Even if the mainland falls, we are to go on fighting. The empire is always with us, wherever our feet tread the earth. P. 86

There is a form of transformation in the nature of the Colonel which can be stated as the deeper meaning of transformation. That is the change from humane to inhumane ideology. Deep-rooted militarism gives birth to insanity in extreme conditions.

Thwarted in their attempts to seize power inside Japan, the military extremists committed their country to large-scale war in China.⁶

The war can be related to the transformation in the thinking process of Kobo as well. He underwent a nervous breakdown during the war. There on we see a change in his outlook towards life. Therefore transformation/ metamorphosis are the most prevalent themes in the majority of his works.

To understand the true essence we have to delve into the intention of Kobo and what he is trying to indicate through the words of the narrator.

The general had curled up tightly in blankets, clutching the emperor's photograph.
P. 88

As on any moving day, odds had been thrown in pell-mell: a heater, folding chairs, a photograph of the emperor, ...and yes, a small bronze statue of emperor Jimmu.
P. 81

The above lines show that army is glorifying imperialism. The emperor is omnipresent. Even, among the various arms, ammunitions and daily necessities. It also showcases the illusion of the emperor being the symbolic head of the military, in turn exposing the extreme nature of fundamentalism.

5. Redefining Transformation: A deeper perspective of the General's death

⁶ Grew, Joseph C. *Ten years in Japan*, Arno Press, New York Times Company, 1972

In the last chapter there is a need to rethink the meaning of transformation in this story. As discussed in the second chapter the process of transformation is examined at the level of death- detachment of the soul- transformation into a spirit, which can be said to be the general meaning of transformation in this context. So over here we will examine the deeper meaning of transformation by analyzing the ideological transformation of the Colonel and the death of the general, in which the process of transformation differs from the other two. This study will aid to derive the true meaning of the word transformation and the intention of the author.

The process of the general's death and rebirth will throw light not only to the degradation of human moral, war criticism and materialization of human beings but also to the existential aspects of human suffering in extreme conditions. His death exposes the dual sided aspect of military organisation and its hierarchial structure, in the process baring its passivity to humanity.

To understand the true meaning of transformation we will divide the General's death in two stages:

1. Scenario till his death
2. Process of Rebirth

Scenario till his death

The General was of the highest rank in the truck inside which he was traveling. Under his command there was a colonel and two low ranking officers. However, from the beginning of the story we see that the General is very nervous and oblivious to the situation. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the colonel is leading the truck in the battlefield and planning out the various military strategy. He is more rigid and in command of the situation.

Trembling, the general put his foot on the runner, looked back, and said in a voice of considerable dignity, you see, I must get back to the mainland and see to my goldfish. P. 97

The above quotation expresses that humans are helpless in extreme conditions as their lives are in the hands of the outsider. In the middle of war there is no meaning to hierarchy. Rather he has become an object of pity in front of his subordinates. He is not in power to give any orders and is subjected to obey the plans of the Colonel. He is suddenly captivated by the fear of death. His position doesn't give him any advantage to change the turn of events, and also he loses his dignity and honor. The above quote discloses his naked emotions. It also clarifies that his reactions are as normal as any human trapped between his life and death. But the military doesn't permit such emotions. He is portrayed as a helpless old man, living under the illusion of the military hierarchy structure. And in the end when he realizes that the truck in which he is riding will not be able to escape, as their truck ends up surrounded by the Chinese red army, he betrays his loyalty to the imperial army and chooses to surrender. But he doesn't realize that he will never be pardoned for dishonoring the imperial army.

He crawled clumsily down, adjusted the belt on his pants, and after ascertaining where his sword was, set off wordlessly in the direction of the village. The colonel turned to the second lieutenant, muttered, "Salute"! and, after waiting for him to touch his fingers to his cap, pulled the trigger on the machine gun. P. 97

As the general of the army, he had only one choice in front of him that is to accept an honorable death. To die while serving the army and not trying to escape from the battlefield. In the beginning the Colonel thought that the general is dying with honor as he was holding the bomb in his hand, so he made way for him. But when he realized that the General had plans, that is to return back to his country and pet a goldfish, the Colonel had no other choice but to kill him as he would disgrace the imperial army if he was left alive. In this case the Colonel gave him an honorable death.

The process of rebirth.

Irregardless of the General's position in the army, he is killed by his subordinates to uphold the honor of the imperial army. As the General was contemplating to surrender to the enemy, he would in turn bring disgrace to the army. Even after his death he is looking for a possibility to gain another life, and he would go to any extent for that. He wouldn't hesitate to even steal the life of a living person. So when he sees a senseless vagrant lying around him he doesn't hesitate to enter his body, displacing the soul of the waif. This scene is a satire about the Japanese Military, portraying their attitude towards human life doesn't change even after death. Kobo has blended realism with fiction in this scene to depict the atrocity of military. Also, depicting the irrepressible desire to regain a body, which is same as that of the other two officers. But in this case only the General knows the ruthless means of regaining a body after death.

Puzzled, we followed quickly, and it was then, while we were approaching, that it happened. There was a dark lump. At first it looked like a large root, but then we saw it was really a human figure lying on the ground. The general pounced on it. He was drawn inside it and seemed to disappear. P. 99

Even though the title of General means the epitome of power and glory from the surface, but when we delve into his inner soul we find him to be pitiable and having very low morale. The General starts to fantasize a normal life in the city tending to his pet (goldfish) but his desire to live is crushed by the army and he is killed. So after death he embarks in a mission to regain his life and return as any other human being. So when he sees a helpless and senseless waif lying near him, he decides to take his life and enters his body. By this the author shows the irony that the general's soul is even lower than that of the waif. He doesn't value the life of others even after his death. Thus it is a vicious circle. Their soul dies and reincarnates due to which human life is continuously

under danger. Author is also attempting to foretell the future. He is describing a scenario of war, which can be related to any period, even the present. That's why he doesn't specify details about the time of war.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks I would like to add that this work was written about ten years after the end of the war and the author attempts to build a similar situation as that of ten years ago by using the narrative of a ghost soldier. He not only criticizes imperialism, militarism, atrocities related to war but he emphasizes the universality of war and its outcome, which can be related to the present scenario. Destruction brings about more destruction and, terrorism gives birth to a different form of terrorism. He brings about a sense of realism to the story, which we can relate to, even after 50 years, since it was written.

Death and transformation which are the two main motifs in this story expose the existential conditions of the humans in extreme conditions. The military has turned blind in upholding their loyalty towards the military and in the process disregarding the value of human lives. The transformation of the General is of greater significance as the author tries to portray the dire consequences due to the fundamentalism of the colonel. The essence of the story can be derived from the fact that it can be applied to the present, the intention of the author in writing the story as a first person narrative of a dead soldier is aimed at giving an unbiased depiction of the scenario of war. He is questioning the value of human life and portraying the futility of war. Also observed is the generalization of the army and reverses the hierarchy structure of the army and renders it meaningless. Postwar experiences of trauma and hopelessness can also be felt deeply in this work, as it predicts the crisis looming over our modern civilization.

Finally I would like to quote Timothy Iles's overview of works Abe Kobo, which can be related to this novel as well.

He was an untiring and astute critic of social tyranny over the individual...Every fundamental human system from language to rational thought, to science with its blind, technological faith, to social and familial order, to fundamentalism and cultural dogmatism, to the process by which individuals formulate and maintain their own private identities, finds its analysis and critique with in Abe.⁷

***All the quotations in this book are from the translated version of Abe Kobo's "*Beyond the Curve*" by Juliet Winters Carpenter.

⁷ Timothy Iles, *Abe Kobo: An exploration of his Prose, Drama and Theatre*, European press academic publishing, 2000