

THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN OE KENZABURO'S EARLY LITERARY WORKS – FOCUSING ON *OUR AGE* AND *SEXUAL BEINGS*¹

Duantem Krisdathanont²

Abstract

Oe Kenzaburo, the 1994 Nobel Prize winner, is one of the most talented authors of the contemporary literary world. However, he has been criticized for lacking an interest in portraying female characters clearly especially in his early years of writing. Considering himself to be a member of the postwar generation, Oe wrote Our Age and Sexual Beings in 1959 and 1963 to illustrate two types of human beings in his generation, the political being (seiji teki ningen) and the sexual being (sei teiki ningen). While the political being is an active hero who opposes others, refusing to conform to any existence in opposition to him, the sexual being neither confronts nor competes with others and yields without any protest. Also in order to expose the despair and alienation of these post-Ampo³ Japanese

youths, Oe creates male characters to portray this theme, while female characters play only supporting roles. In addition, though the female characters in these two novels are developed from those in earlier works, they are still flat characters and not sufficiently developed in the story compared with the male characters. They are still created as the 'other' in the society. In this essay, I will examine in detail how female characters in Oe's Our Age and Sexual Beings are created as human beings who are inferior in the patriarchal society.

Introduction

Oe Kenzaburo is a novelist whose works express the disillusionment and rebellion of his post-World War II generation. His stories often revolve around marginal people and outcasts, those isolated from mainstream society. As in the works of a number of other Japanese writers, Oe writes of the conflict between Japanese traditions and modern Western culture. *Our Age*, one of his famous works, is a long novel published written in 1959, and it was announced nine months after *Leap before you Look*. All of important characters are put into situations with no way out. The author chose the miserable 'our' age under the rule of the United States, and all the male characters, such as the protagonist Yasuo, Shigeru, Yasuo's younger brother, and Yagisawa, a leader of the communist students' movement are described as young Japanese people in the 'the humiliating situation' of being under the US control. The female characters seem to play the role of occupier of the vagina, characters which are the keys by which the male characters reach their theme. However, though the female characters in this story sometimes show more power over the men, only the male

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² Lecturer, Japanese Section, Department of Eastern Languages, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn university.

³ The US-Japan Security Treaty after Japan was defeated in WW2.

characters are involved in the main theme of this story, female characters are thus the 'other' in the society.

Also in *Sexual Beings*, a famous novel published in 1963, a story of rebellious youth who stand opposed to society, searching for taboo-breaking pleasures, all of the female characters play merely supporting roles. J, the protagonist, represents the young man of the new age who yearns to be a 'chikan' (sexual pervert). Hence, the female image in this story is once again regarded as a sexual object serving the male character's desire. In this essay, I will examine the female image in Oe Kenzaburo's *Our Age* and *Sexual Beings* and will consider a number of problems concerning women's surrender to the male society.

The Female Characters in *Our Age*

In 1959 when *Our Age* was published, Oe himself pointed out that it 'contains a sexual reference on virtually every page' (Shinohara, 1974:134). The protagonist Yasuo – a French literature student is living with Yoriko as her gigolo. Yoriko is a middle aged prostitute for foreigners and Oe intentionally symbolizes Yoriko's relationship with her foreign customer as the relationship between Japan and the USA. Yasuo considers himself and men of his generation people who are 'hopeless' in this 'peaceful era' and born too late for those heroic moments of war time. In his hopeless state, the protagonist always lapses into a miserable condition after having sex with Yoriko and he calls this hopeless state the 'world of pudendum'. At that moment, the only hope in Yasuo's life is to win a thesis contest award in order to obtain a scholarship to study in France sponsored by a Japanese

newspaper business and a French publisher. In other words, the only hope in his life is to flee from living with Yoriko in the 'world of pudendum', and this only 'hope' also symbolizes the desire of the protagonist to flee from life under the rule of the United States.

Unlike his contemporaries who had engaged in sexual themes as an aesthetic subject, Oe decided that his approach should be more realistic. He intended to employ sex in as direct way as possible, using language and images that would not leave any doubt about their authenticity. The intention was to shock, challenge and awaken the audience into acknowledging that abnormality in all people which, when repressed, manifests itself in political acts (Oe, 1965: 243). As a result, the female characters in *Our Age* are regarded as sexual objects. As mentioned earlier Oe intended to 'seriously consider the sexual issue in literature' and as a result, there is a lot of sexual language used in this novel. The female character 'Yoriko', for example, is a prostitute and is basically nothing more than a vagina as Matsubara Shinichi (1967: 188) has mentioned. When one considers other female characters such as the 'young office lady', she has also been raped and is described as a girl who tries to get her revenge on young men. Also, there are a lot of scenes in which Oe uses direct sexual language as follows:

'If you want to sleep with anybody, rape the young Jewish girl. After raping her, stab her chest with a bayonet once, and it will be all done' (Oe, 1966: 196).⁴

⁴ All the English translations in this story are my own.

'As brave as being able to rape five hundred Korean girls' (Oe, 1966: 260).

'How would it feel being gang raped, imagining that makes the bottom of my heart shiver and my sexual organ stiffen' (Oe, 1966: 242).

We cannot deny that Oe uses this language to represent the problem of 'sex and politics' in his work and apparently he was influenced by Norman Mailer on the issue of 'sex' (see Oe, 1965: 272-285; 607-610). However, Mailer's concept of sex has also been criticized by feminists such as Kate Millet. As Millet (2000: 26) has pointed out, patriarchy has naturally influenced society, which includes literature, philosophy, psychology and politics. Oe's decision to create female images as sexual objects implies that he himself was under the influence of a patriarchal system, regardless of whether he was aware of it or not.

However, while female characters are created as sexual objects to male characters which reflect the pattern of the ordinary subject-object relationship between men and women in patriarchal society, the female characters in this story are also created to be more complex as the subject in the relationship with her lover in many scenes. From the very beginning of the story, while Yoriko keeps calling Yasuo 'my angel' throughout the story and considers that 'as long as the youth on top of her, was not thinking about something other than her body and lengthening the time of the sexual act, she did not have anything to complain about, so she cried out in pleasure' (Oe, 1966: 129). The protagonist is only aware that 'the thinking

was infused with a recurrent feeling of hopelessness and self hatred, a kind of desperate feeling' (Oe, 1966: 129). For Yasuo, sex is nothing more than an escape and his so called 'world of pudendum' is concerned with only the sexual relationship between him and his lover. The protagonist expresses his desire to flee from 'world of pudendum' in detail:

Yasuo was gazing at the bedroom door, (focusing energy on his eyes as if he could see through the door) staring beyond in amazement, at that place. There was a room filled with a sour smell and with a moist rosy color something like a slimy pudenda. Covered with heat rash from fatty neck to rounded shoulder, and breast to inner thigh, the big sized lady was lying on her stomach giving the impression of being deep asleep. What Yasuo want to flee from was nothing but the world of the slimy rosy-color pudendum. The West is hardly compressed and probably freshly waiting for the arrival of an eastern man! ... Oh, what I want to flee from is this pudenda-like bedroom, and the odorous pudenda and the sweaty inner thigh of the girl who's lying there! (Oe, 1966: 186)

Kono Kensuke (1997: 39) called Yasuo's repetition of 'world of pudendum' as 'perfect women hatred'. The protagonist is seeking for a woman as his sexual object but fearing the woman as an existence that

is harmful to him at the same time. Hence, according to Kono's explanation, Yasuo feels that he has been raped over a long period. In other words, the pattern of the relationship between Yasuo and Yoriko here is opposite to that of patriarchy. Yasuo considers, contradictorily, that he himself, who is supposed to be the subject, is controlled by Yoriko, who is supposed to be an object. Oe's female characterization as the image of a destroyer clearly indicates that Oe does not create female characters merely as an object to male characters. Sometimes, vagina are capable of being harmful to men, which reflects the fact that the pattern of relationship between male and female characters in *Our Age* is not defined only in the pattern of subject and object. Also, since 'Yasuo', the protagonist is created as an impotent human being, both male and female characters represent the same image of oppressed human beings in society and this also reflects another pattern of relationship between female and male characters in the story: that of object-object.

As shown above, while Yoriko in *Our Age* is created as a female character representing 'pudenda' to the protagonist and also a weak existence in the novel, on the other hand, Yoriko, as well as the other female characters in *Our Age*, also represents the image of destroyer to the male characters as well. Starting with Yoriko, her pregnancy is another indication of the suffocating nature of sexuality in Yasuo's eyes (see Napier, 1991: 53). When Yoriko announces that she is giving birth to a child, Yasuo loses his temper and screams 'Go get the abortion, I can't stand this. Please I beg you to go get an abortion' (Oe, 1966: 256). The womb, which carries a baby and is

the symbol of woman, is created as a destroyer of the protagonist's intention to escape from Japan. If we consider other scenes, we can see the repetition of 'woman as a destroyer' many times. Shigeru, Yasuo's younger brother, who is a pianist in a jazz trio 'The Unlucky Young Men' plans to become a terrorist and throw a bomb at the Emperor's limousine, hoping to earn enough money to flee in a huge truck. Unluckily, the grenade gets soiled with menstrual blood while it is hidden in a sanitary napkin disposal receptacle. His plan therefore fails. This time, menstruation blood which represents woman also brings about the young man's failure. In addition, the last scene, when Shigeru is shot by the police while under suspicion for a crime he has not committed, the female character, the 'young office lady', is the person who betrays his trust by informing the police of his hiding place. This time the female character does not only represent the image of destroyer but is also becomes the person who leads the male character to a violent death.

As seen above Oe creates the relationship between female and male characters in *Our Age*, especially that of Yoriko and Yasuo, as a complex relationship mixing the subject-sexual object, the object-object, and the oppressor- the oppressed pattern in order to describe Yasuo's desire to flee from his own mother country. This explains the fact that Oe also creates female characters as symbols of Japan, the mother country from where the protagonist is trying to escape. However, though Oe creates female characters as ones who can be sexual objects and harmful to male characters at the same time, the problem of female characterization in this story still remains. The crucial point is, although the

protagonist feels that while using Yoriko's vagina as his hiding place he has become an object to his lover, the reader can see clearly that the feeling comes from his egoistical character. However, Yoriko never feels this at all. On the contrary, Yoriko shows her feelings of romantic love to Yasuo even though he hates her.

When considering Yoriko's affection for Yasuo in terms of Kate Millet's concept of romantic love (Millet, 1970: 37), apparently the protagonist is exploiting the female character's affection for his own good. Nevertheless, Yoriko approves of the protagonist's character and Oe never lets her protest. Coming to the point, is it too early to conclude that Yoriko as the female character represents the image of a woman's surrender to a male society here?

Furthermore, from the beginning of the story, Yoriko is created to have a dependent existence. Oe deliberately names her 'Yoriko', which means 'a dependent girl'. She keeps calling the protagonist 'my angel' throughout the story and when it comes to the scene she realizes that she is pregnant, Yoriko feebly mourned as follows:

'Oh, pregnancy, it doesn't give me any way to go, whichever way I choose leads me to a dead path.....my angel, my angel, my angel, please help pitiful me!' (Oe, 1966: 190)

Not only does this mourning clearly shows her weakness, but after the protagonist announces that he will take the scholarship and break up with her, the desperate Yoriko decides to commit suicide. Luckily, Yoriko is saved but is apparently still not

able to live on her own. This female character therefore flies to Wilson, her long time customer immediately. Considering this character, it is apparent that Oe has created Yoriko as a weak entity whose life must depend solely on a man. As we can see, this character fits well into the pattern of women in the Japanese society of 1960.

The female characters in *Our Age* play various roles as sexual objects to male characters and sometimes play roles as oppressors to male characters. However, the major problem of Oe's female characters in *Our Age* is the fact that they are still created as outsiders, 'others'. As one realizes, the main theme of this novel concerns 'sex and politics'. In Oe's essay 'Our World of Sex', he distinguishes two kinds of humans as 'sexual beings' and 'political beings' as follows:

In their oppositional role political beings begin to function by forcing an 'other' into being. The ultimate purpose of their function is also to force the other to exist in opposition to them or to bring about the destruction of the other. The universe that surrounds political beings is filled with confrontation with the other.

On the other hand, sexual beings neither confront nor compete with 'others' in the universe. They assimilate without opposition ... (Oe, 1965: 315)

Political beings and sexual beings stand in juxtaposition. To sum up, political beings strive to defeat 'others' whereas sexual

beings simply conform. According to Matsubara Shinichi, contemporary Japan falls into the category of a 'sexual being country' which simply conforms to the rule of the United States. Similar to the protagonist in *Our age*, Yasuo is considered a 'sexual being' because part of his character deal with his sexual life. Apparently, even though he has the feeling of being disgusted and 'captured' during intercourse with Yoriko, he does not refuse to continue. In political terms, Yasuo also presents his character as a 'sexual being' because, in the latter half of the novel, he gives up his opportunity to further his studies in France since he does not want to betray his Arab friend who has come to Japan to fight against France for Algeria. However, it is clearly seen that the protagonist does not make such a decision because he truly understands the political movement his friend has been involved in. He actually does what he does because he wants to flee from 'his fear from being dirty'. His Arab friend, Shigeru and Taka: the other members of the Jazz trio, 'Unlucky Young Men', on the other hand stand juxtaposed to him. They are all created to be 'political beings' who have never been afraid to confront others and they refuse to do things against their own will.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Oe's concept of the 'sexual being' and 'political being' is not only relevant to ordinary life but also to the 'actual political condition'. The characters are created to represent young men in a humiliated condition during the era of US rule. Unfortunately, none of the female characters in the novel is involved with political activity. While both Yasuo and the female characters are described as the oppressed human beings and the 'other' in the society, somehow they are the 'other' in different ways.

Although Yasuo abandons his right to participate in political activity, Oe gives Yasuo the right 'to choose' whether he wants to participate. However, none of the female characters in the story is given the right to choose whether she wants to participate in the activities. Therefore, Yasuo's character as the 'other' fits the explanation of a 'sexual being' in Oe's terms, however, female characters' the 'other' reflects the fact that they are neither 'political beings' nor 'sexual beings'. In this case, they are eventually created in a mere supporting role that fulfils the sexual desires of the hero in order to be easily categorized as Oe's 'sexual being' or 'political being'. Therefore, it is not difficult to conclude that female characters in *Our Age* are only the outsiders, 'the others' of society according to men's assumptions.

The Female Characters in *Sexual Beings*

Coming to *Sexual Beings* (translated as *J* in *Seventeen and J*) which was published in 1963, Oe creates the characters in a world engaged in only perverted and anti-social sex. Unlike the impotent Yasuo in *Our Age*, the protagonist 'J' attempts to challenge the oppressive nature of society, which reveals itself in the form his perversion. The novel begins with the arrival of a big Jaguar car in the coastal resort of Miminashi Bay. The characters appearing in the novel are 'J' the protagonist, Michiko (his wife), his younger sister, a cameraman, a poet, a 20-year-old actor and a jazz singer. The female characters, which include Michiko, Keiko: the jazz singer and J's younger sister, the sculptor, once again play supporting roles here to help the protagonist express his sexual life by challenging for something anti-social.

The young group come to the village to make a movie called 'Inferno'. After arriving, they come across a group of 30 villagers who are mostly middle-aged women. Soon the young group finds out that the crowd is gathered outside the house of a woman who is being denounced for her unfaithful sexual acts, which, according to local belief, will cause divine retribution on the whole village. At this point, Oe hints that from the beginning of the story, the sexual issue, which is supposed to be a personal matter, has become a public matter. In other words, this is an example of the strange blurring of the private and public spheres (see Royo, 1997: 73).

Even if it is clearly described that the reason for the group of seven coming to the resort is to make a film, it also can be easily understood that at the root is the protagonist's desire to create his own 'sexual microcosm'. This long held plan is the protagonist's intention to commit perverted sexual acts and no place is more suitable than a remote village like Miminashi Bay. After the young group has arrived, they hold a party and engage in swinging sexual activities, firstly, J and the jazz singer, then Michiko and the young poet. However, the sexual scene between Michiko and the young poet is interrupted by J's repeated calls for his wife and the young poet ends up masturbating alone in the bathroom.

Eventually the film is never made because a village child witnesses the lovemaking of the couples. The young group is condemned for their perverted sexual acts which, according to the village's ancient beliefs, will bring misfortune in the form of poor fishing catches. The film project,

as well as J's intention to create a 'sexual microcosm,' has collapsed and the first half of the novel comes to an end.

Once again the female characters play supporting roles in this novel. To present the theme of life within walls, and the life of the young generation who use perversion as an escape from the struggle against the authoritarian power, Oe creates Mitsuko, Keiko, J's sister to help his male characters achieve the theme and these female characters in their sexual roles are worth discussing.

Mitsuko, the protagonist's wife, plays the most important role of the female characters. For Mitsuko, 'J was the ideal husband. He gave her everything she needed to make a film, and he always let her stay inside herself. She was trying to become a truly liberated female artist, and for that, she had to be free of all the constraints that constitute womanhood. She had to reject every temptation that might turn her firm insides into an unstable viscous gruel. Her orgasm as a woman would destroy her fundamental anti-feminist rights as a filmmaker' (Oe, 1996: 114). Compared with other female characters in Oe's earlier works, Mitsuko seems to be an independent female character who desires to be free from any man. However, this female character is characterized by a lack of depth and her statement seems to come from a mouthpiece for misplaced feminism (Royo, 1997: 76). Although Mitsuko tries very hard not to fall into the trap that destroys her fundamental anti-feminist rights, her action is totally distant from her intention. First of all, Mitsuko considers J an ideal husband since he can give her the budget for making a film, and it can be interpreted that eventually, Mitsuko (= woman, the object) has to rely on J (=

man, the subject). In the second part of the novel, Mitsuko has an affair with J's long time friend, the cameraman, and gets pregnant. These actions are completely opposed from her intention not to fall into a trap that will destroy her so called 'anti-feminist rights'. This female character is also created to be in juxtaposition to the protagonist. While Oe describes her as a woman who is not interested in any sexual pleasure, J is a man who has yearned for his 'sexual microcosm'. For J, Mitsuko is the perfect wife who accepts it even when J leads the jazz singer into the sexual world of their marriage. J's ultimate desire is to complete his homosexual action by bringing the young actor into their sexual world and his wife shows no particular shock when the twenty-year old boy slips into their bed. Once again, the female character is created to fulfil the protagonist's desire in sex but unfortunately, the female character herself is not described sufficiently and the reader knows nothing of her character except when she presents something relating to J.

Keiko, the jazz singer, is created as a complete sexual object. From the very beginning, Keiko is the only naked one in the Jaguar. This female character is created to be a woman who 'lacks self-restraint' and loves to expose her naked body in public. J regards Keiko as one of the girls who can fulfil his 'sexual microcosm' and is only aware of her as a shameless sexual partner. Furthermore, Keiko is created as another female character to juxtapose with the protagonist. This is because she is pleased to be an object and being seen naked (= the object), while the protagonist desires to commit sexual harassment (= the subject). In the second part of the novel, Keiko becomes a fully sexual object-character when she turns into a prostitute to the rich. Here, we

cannot help but see a prostitute as a sexual object, engaging in a career which shows woman's submission to men by using *her* body to earn *his* money⁵.

J's sister, the sculptor, on the other hand, is created differently. Although this twenty-seven-years-old woman is as fond of perverted sex as the other members in the group, this female character is described as a courageous woman. Her relationship with the lover always displays an attempt to challenge the oppressive nature of society which reveals itself in the form of perversion, and the sculptor's superiority over men.

'Who was better, me or the foreigner?' The boy's coquettish voice repeated, low and insistent, from the sofa by the wall. 'Well, who was better, me or the foreigner?'

'When I was overseas, I didn't know what to do if I've got pregnant. I was scared to death at the thought of it. I was still a child then, ' the sculptor finally answered, sounding sleepy.

'But who was better, me or the foreigner?' the twenty-year-old actor went on in a sing-song voice.

⁵ One might argue that Keiko and J share the same character as a sex-lover who tries to use sexual activity as an escape route from life under pressure. However, her final decision to become a prostitute to the rich makes her image as a representative of women yearning for perverted sex among the oppressed society disappear.

The young actor's repeated asking of the question 'Who was better?' shows that he is worried about the sculptor's judgment of his sexual ability which implies the fact that the female sculptor is put into a superior position over the young actor in this relationship. Unfortunately, this female character does not play a very important role in the story and she is not described adequately, so, the reader cannot see this character's full development until the end of the story.

When the protagonist begins his journey to becoming a sexual pervert in the second half with other male characters, the female characters in the first half are barely mentioned. J becomes a friend to an old man and a young kid as they became his perverted sexual companions. The first day that J and the old man meet the young kid, he is trying to ejaculate against a woman's back in the train so they save him from being caught, and then they all go to drink a few beers. While drinking, the young kid talks about writing a poem *Genshuku na tsunawatari* or walking earnestly on a tightrope. Regarding perverts or *chikans*, there are tens of thousands of them in Tokyo alone, but they're all solitary and spiritually impoverished matadors of everyday life (Oe, 1996: 154). The life of *chikans* is like the life of tightrope walkers which J always yearns for. The young kid described his idea of being a *chikan* as follows:

Chikans have a terribly profound fear of being discovered and punished, but at the same time, without that feeling of danger, their pleasure is diluted, it becomes vague

and attenuated, and in the end it's nothing at all. The taboo guarantees the pleasure of the adventure to the tightrope-walkers. But when the *chikans* safely pass their test, in that instant, the safe ending destroys the revolutionary meaning the activity has when it was still going forward with its results unknown. Eventually the *chikans* realize that, since there isn't really any danger, the feeling of danger that was the true element of their pleasure up to that point was nothing but a fake. So the pleasure itself, which they have only just finished tasting, is a false pleasure. Thus they have to start their barren tightrope-walking all over again, and continue until they're caught and their lives are in danger. Then, all the dry runs they've undergone up to then make the flower of ecstasy bloom (Oe, 1996: 154-155).

The concept of being a *chikan* as the young man presents it impresses J tremendously. This concept also reflects Oe's view of perverted sex among the oppressed society; that the sex is a manifestation of escape. After learning about the idea of *chikans* from this young man, he wakes up one day and decides to become a *chikatetsu chikan* (a subway molester). J's first sexual attack experience is full of feelings of guilt, emptiness and excitement. However, the excitement and fear stay only briefly when he realizes that the woman not only

permitted him to do what he did but seemed to be satisfied with his sexual harassment. At that moment, J loses his fear and his desire weakens at the same time.

He became cool-headed. *This is what always happens*, he thought. *When you can get away with anything, you can never get to that one reality that transcends this condition.* It was nothing more than a step in the same process that had repeated itself time and again since the day he had decided to become a *chikan*, a deviant. Then, suddenly, his fingertips felt the solitary orgasm of this stranger (Oe, 1996: 168).

However, after the protagonist leaves the train and continues to stand on the platform, he realizes that the woman has not looked at him for even a second and he feels terribly lonely. His encounter with that woman is J's happiest memory as a *chikan* and he keeps searching for the woman for a few weeks, hoping that he can marry and live with her even if he has to beg for it.

The female characters in the second part of the story are mostly those who are sexually harassed by J and his fellows. J, the old man and the young poet use these women in the subway as sexual victims in their perverted activities. These women are mentioned only when it comes to the scene where they become sexual objects for male characters. However, there are some female characters who do not fit this explanation. As seen above, J loses his fear and desire in ejaculating when he

finds that the woman not only permitted him to commit his crime without any protest but also seemed to be enjoying it. This interesting scene clearly shows that the female characters who seem to be created as only sexual objects sometimes break the pattern of the relationship between the pervert and his victim.

Another female character who breaks this pattern of relationship is the woman whom J meets on the bus. While J is trying to attack her, she seems to be enjoying the action and even asks him to find a cheap hotel so that they can make love together. Once again, this situation makes J totally lose his desire and he is impotent to the last (Oe, 1996: 172). These scenes clearly show that the sexual pervert is yearning for a relationship only in the pattern of subject (= pervert) and object (= victim), not an equal one. Therefore, Oe's characterization of female characters as shown above reflects the fact that Oe's female characterization in this story has been developed from his other earlier works.

However, the problem of Oe's portrayal of female characters as the 'other' in society still remains. As Oe intends to portray a world engaging in only perverted and anti-social sex and creates male characters who challenge the oppressive nature of society revealing itself in the form of perversion, none of female characters can be categorized in the same group as those who try to challenge society. As mentioned earlier, all of the female characters in the first half of the novel are eventually created to be the same as other female characters in a patriarchal society. Only the sculptor seems to be different from the others but is not described well enough so we cannot fathom her in the latter half. Also, the

female characters in the second half of the story are only those who are victims, actual and false ones. Consequently, *Sexual Beings*' female characters are notable for playing supporting roles and become significant only in the scenes of male bonding.

Before the end of the story, the young poet who has joined the molester club with J and the old man plans to be a public molester. The protagonist and the old man follow him to see him kidnapping a little girl. However, as the poor girl dives in front of a train, the young man throws her to safety at the very last minute and is crushed by the oncoming train. J can hear the mother of the little girl call the young *chikan* a god who has saved her child. This time, Oe intentionally creates the young poet as a dual image character, the molester and the god who saves the child. At the end of the story, J's father persuades him to take a job and return to normal life and society. Although he first agrees to take a chance, he eventually goes back to the train and makes one sexual attack on the subway. At the end of the story, J is caught and he begins to cry. This time he considers his tears to be 'his compensation for those his wife cried the night she killed herself' (Oe, 1996: 194), the tears which provide him with a sense of freedom from the inferno inside him.

The latter half of the story clearly shows that none of the female characters participates in the problem of lives under pressure and, unlike the male characters, none of their attempts to challenge the oppressive nature of society reveals itself in the form of perversion. Although there are some sexually harassed female characters who can not be categorized as sexual objects, none of them can be categorized as active heroine who

represents women of this oppressive era either. Therefore, this problem implies the fact that though the female characters in *Sexual Beings* are developed more than the female characters in the earlier stories they are still created as inferior to male characters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Oe's two novels in his late early period, *Our Age* and *Sexual Beings* share the same theme: the life of young generations living under a dictatorial political power and sex as an escape from their repressive lives. However, in order to present this theme, Oe uses a lot of sexual words and expressions which portray female characters as sexual objects. Consequently, female characters are represented in the novels as vaginas-organs of escape, entrapment and suffocation for the male characters, and organs for male release his perverted sex at the same time. One cannot deny that Oe's portrayal of the female characters in *Our Age* and *Sexual Beings* reflects the fact that, sometimes women can be more powerful than men and Oe's characterization of these characters has developed from earlier works. However, the female characters are still capable of being categorized as 'the other' in a patriarchal society and the only oppressed human beings. Although, the female characters in Oe's works after the late 1970s are well developed and play a much more important role as can be seen in *The Contemporary Game* (1979) or *Women Who Listen to the Rain Tree* (1982), we cannot deny that Oe's earlier works show the oppression of women in Japanese society and that Oe was under the influence of a patriarchal system at that time. I will subsequently explore how female characters in Oe Kenzaburo's

novels have developed and how that development relates to his entire works

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