

Ooka Shohei : On Wars and Writing **by: Criselda Yabes**

Ooka Shohei is in the reading list for Japanese scholars studying the Philippines, but the writer who wrote extensively about the World War II in the Philippines is hardly known in the country. He was a literary critic and essayist when he was drafted to serve in the Imperial Army towards the end of the war, in mid-1944. Six months later he was captured by the Americans on the island of Mindoro and sent to Leyte – which would be the subject of his works, both fiction and non-fiction. It wasn't entirely about the Philippines that his books dealt with; in fact the Philippines was a backdrop to his narration, a nostalgic memory he had of the mountains and the sunsets, with very little interaction with the people.

It was the National Artist Resil Mojares who urged me to research on Ooka Shohei (1909-1988). For two months as fellow of The Japan Foundation in 2018, I was at the right place to be: Kyoto University. And having Professor Caroline Hau of the university's Center for Southeast Asian Studies as counterpart to my study, I dug in to find out about Ooka. The libraries had his books in French translations, and I thought that he would surely have liked that of his alma mater. He studied French literature in Kyoto University, leaving Tokyo where he was born and raised in a fairly affluent family – his father was a stockbroker and his mother a former geisha. He anchored himself on Stendhal whose influence on him were marked in his books, getting right to it from the very first chapter of his 500-page *Journal d'un Prisonnier de Guerre*.

Sent to fight in the war, Ooka belonged to an infantry unit that was mostly made up of reservists. He was a private. He didn't believe in the war. He and a friend were planning an escape to Borneo. He knew Japan was going to lose but it was yet making a last stand in the Philippines against the Americans, referring to the Japanese military as a "massive organization by which an entire nation exercises its violent power." The army company he was with lost three-fourths of its men, leaving the rest to be divided between those who would move ahead and those who would stay behind. Fighting wasn't the only thing that took their lives; malaria was also the killer. Ooka suffered from it, and it was partly due to that that he was captured, although surrender was closer to the truth of his circumstances.

To be taken prisoner, in the Japanese doctrine, meant the ultimate disgrace for a soldier and his family. Having no alternative, a hand grenade was a Japanese soldier's "sole friend," the only thing that could end their shame. Ooka's grenade was a dud. He tried to kill himself but lost his balance. He had caught sight of a young American soldier and he should have fired but he didn't, because since "I'm going to die anyway, I won't kill." He moved away, he was very thirsty, he saw a river and drifted off to sleep. And that was how he was caught.

The rest of the journal read more like a fairy tale if one would compare it to the horrors of the war. This isn't a typical story of bravado and heroism that went with books about wars. In prison he had thought from the very start that he would be killed, little realizing that he would develop rare friendships with his American captors. Keeping his pride, he had to say he was captured but he eventually caved in to the interrogation. 'Prisoners of War in fiction often refuse to say anything besides, 'I am a

common soldier.’ But I did not follow that example. Without the least hesitation, I gave my name, rank, and unit. It seemed easiest to simply tell the truth about such routine things.”

That he spoke English made him an important prisoner. From Mindoro, where he was put in a military hospital to recover from malaria, he was taken to Leyte along with the other prisoners. Inside the camp, the hierarchy among the Japanese soldiers changed; it was no longer a matter of rank, it was whether they had been captured or had surrendered. Being there was almost a luxury: they had full meals of 2,700 calories per day – a fact that Ooka often repeated in his narration – and they also earned about three dollars per month. Cigarettes were in abundance, so much so that they’d cut the butts off to use as chips for board games. There were 700 officers and men – who were among the last survivors of 135,000 troops deployed to defend Leyte, where General MacArthur had landed to reclaim the Philippines.

In prison, Ooka tried to write. He wanted to write his great novel but couldn’t. Instead he read Life magazine and detective novels in English. What he wrote were plays and scripts that he rented out to the other prisoners for entertainment as it were, and when others copied his works he complained angrily about the breach of copyright. But it was from his experience in the POW camp that he was able to get the plot, later after the war, for his cult novel *Fires On the Plain*, which would be adapted into a black-and-white film in 1959. Unlike his journal – which actually wasn’t a journal because he didn’t keep one, saying it was a narcissistic behavior, therefore relying mostly on his recollection – the novel that would make him famous had a sparse style

of writing. The author was detached from the cruelties of the war and yet showing that cannibalism was the ultimate form of barbarism.

It was in prison that he had met a fellow soldier who talked about it as one of those things that happened during the previous war in China, where the policy was 'anything goes.' Ooka himself had never seen it. When he learned of it, he stopped talking to the officer; and when the officer confronted him about why he was avoiding him, he couldn't say why.

On comparing both the novel and the journal, the one common thing that stood out was his description of the tropical landscape of the Philippine countryside. And there was also the church, a striking scene in the novel (as it turned out, Ooka was a Christian). When he was ill and taken to the camp by the Americans, he wrote: "Once they had hoisted the stretchers on their shoulders, all I could see from where I lay was the bright sky and the leafy treetops lining both sides of the road. Watching the beautiful green foliage flow by me on and on as the stretcher moved forward, it finally began to sink in that I had been saved – that the duration of my life now extended indefinitely into the future. It struck me, too, just how bizarre an existence I had been leading, facing death at every turn."

He had little contact with Filipinos except for the tribe of the Mangyans in Mindoro who he said were indifferent about the war. As a prisoner, the Filipinos he came across were those he saw when being transported by the Americans, seeing them giving gestures that they, the Japanese prisoners, should be killed. In the novel, there was an interesting twist in the character of a Filipino woman whom the

protagonist killed in a state of panic – an act the author seemed to have avenged when a Filipino woman in military uniform in an American convoy opened fire at Japanese soldiers who were about to surrender, screaming in Tagalog, ‘I will kill you all.’

Ooka was repatriated to Japan along with the other prisoners more than a year later, in December 1945 – about half a year after the bombs fell in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The last chapter of *Journal* was a typical military report giving the chronology of the company, as if he was showing that in the end he was not only a writer, he was a soldier too.

This isn't where reading Ooka Shohei ends. His experience of the war carried on to his works of fiction, one of which, *La Dame du Mosashino*, reads like a classic. There were hints not only of Stendhal but of Flaubert as well. A publisher in France that caters to literature in Asia has translated his novels into French, but much of Ooka's works have yet to be translated into English, and if that happens I will be the first to read them. Ooka was comfortable using the same elements in switching genres; if I had discovered him much earlier I could have sat him through an interview and talked about wars and writing. My research in Kyoto had only just begun.

Criselda Yabes was a recipient of The Japan Foundation's Asia Fellowship Program in late 2018. She is a writer and journalist who covered conflicts in the southern Philippines and in other parts of the world. She has written books mostly about

Mindanao. She is currently researching on the 2017 battle of Marawi – with the fellowship in Kyoto having contributed to ideas and style for the project.