

ASIAN AND OCEANIAN LITERATURE AND EPILEPSY

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Several important writers of Asia and Oceania have included accounts of epilepsy in their work, and they have done it in different ways.

One of the earliest examples is the *Ch'in Ping Mei* (金瓶梅), a great realistic novel of an anonymous Chinese writer of the 16th century. It depicts many facets of everyday life in China at the time including health and medicine. The treatment and eventual death of a 14 months old child in a status of febrile convulsions is presented with interesting details about professional and lay management of such a situation. There is an indication that the antiepileptic effect of arousing sensory stimuli was known at the time.¹

A quite different lethal status epilepticus, provoked by the consumption of multiple life-style drugs, figures in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999). This author also comes back to the old myth of a relation of epilepsy and prophecy in *Midnight's Children* (1981) where a soothsayer on a roof in Delhi foretells to the letter the future of the still unborn protagonist, and at the end collapses in a seizure. And in his ill-famed *Satanic Verses* (1988) it is the false prophet Ayesha who has epilepsy.

Of greater interest, however, are works where the epilepsy of a significant character becomes an important part of the plot, and these may be based on the authors' personal experiences. Thus, Australian writer Susan Hawthorne's novel *The Falling Woman* (1992) makes no secret of the (autobiographical) main character's epilepsy and her criticism of the medical treatment and lack of attention she gets.¹

New Zealand writer Janet Frame has a younger brother with epilepsy, as we know from her autobiographic books. In two of her novels, *Owls Do Cry* (1957) and *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) this experience has inspired the character of Toby Withers.¹ There are many realistic details about living with epilepsy (and a minor mental retardation), but we are also impressed by the transformation of the young man's seizure experiences into a poetic metaphor.²

The most impressive example is that of Japanese Nobel Prize laureate Kenzaburo Oe. In almost his entire literary production, he refers to his son Hikari who was born with a meningocele, is mentally retarded with autistic traits, and has reduced visual capacity but also extraordinary musical gifts. In many of his novels, a handicapped son and his father who is a writer are recurring characters. Young Oe developed epilepsy around puberty whereafter it also started to appear in the father's literary works.² Interestingly, however, already in *The Silent Cry* (*Man'en gannen no foot ball*), a novel written long before the onset of Hikari's epilepsy, the character representing the writer is said to have had a seizure as a young man. Probably this is an autobiographic trait. For some time, in Oe's fiction, the epilepsy of the character inspired by son Hikari is just one additional feature of his burden of illness, and everybody takes care that he takes his medication regularly. But then, in the writer's trilogy of the 1990ies, *Green Tree in Flames*, apart from a brief reference, again, to Hikari's antiepileptic treatment, one of the central characters has epilepsy, and his seizures become a major motive in the artistic composition. His helplessness in the postictal phase induces fundamental changes in the attitudes of others. By and by, epilepsy grows into the role of the key metaphor in a mythological narrative, an image of the death and resurrection of Saviour figures.

Epilepsy appears in literature for various reasons.³⁻⁸ Various aspects have been outlined in a series of brief articles for the publication of the International Bureau of Epilepsy (IBE), *International Epilepsy News*.^{6,9-11} The narrative may reflect but also influence popular views of epilepsy, both enlightened and stigmatising. Seizures may be introduced for dramatic effects, to create a sophisticated plot, or for mystery. Great art may go beyond that, and reflect upon epilepsy as a human condition, which is deeply connected with matters of life and death.

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